WHEN TRYING TO SURPRISE YOUR OPPONENT BACKFIRES: EXPOSING THE WEAKNESS OF THE INDIRECT APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

It is often thought that great military strategists do not engage in simple, frontal assaults, but instead devise complex plans meant to deceive, manipulate, and surprise their enemies. However, do such strategies always lead to victory? If not, what are some of the reasons why they fail to? In order to answer these questions, this paper will examine one such strategy known as the “indirect approach,” which was developed by Basil Liddell Hart, a famous British historian and military strategist. The main concept of the indirect approach is that the optimal military strategy is to position your forces in such a way that victory in the battle is essentially guaranteed before any fighting occurs. This is accomplished by concentrating your forces against a weak point of your enemy and, as a result, catching the enemy commander off-guard, which is a process that is heavily dependent on surprise. Although the indirect approach and other similar strategies provide valuable insights and can be of great utility to military commanders, this paper advances three central criticisms against the indirect approach. First, while the indirect approach assumes that you can successfully surprise your opponent, this may not be the case if you have incorrect and/or incomplete information about their strategies and capabilities. Therefore, the benefits of successfully surprising your opponent may never materialize. Second, the methods used to achieve surprise can reduce military effectiveness. For example, to surprise your opponent

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you may need to take the road less traveled by climbing over the mountain rather than going around it. However, this can increase the fatigue of your soldiers and reduce their performance on the battlefield. Thus, there may be costs associated with adopting an indirect approach as opposed to an alternative strategy that calls for different methods. Third, partially due to the above factors, the indirect approach does not *always* lead to victory on the battlefield. In fact, adopting an indirect approach *can* lead to worse battlefield outcomes than if a more “direct approach” (e.g., a simple frontal assault) is employed.

In order to support these limited claims, I begin by describing in detail what the indirect approach actually is and discussing some of the theoretical disadvantages related to its reliance on surprise. I then proceed to utilize a case study (the Battle of Midway between the U.S. and Japan) as evidence to support my claims. The Battle demonstrates that Japan utilized an indirect approach, that this strategy failed miserably to achieve victory due to points one and two above, and that Japan would have been better off adopting a more direct approach that avoided the harmful methods associated with point two above.

WHAT IS THE INDIRECT APPROACH?

In order to critically analyze the indirect approach, we must first understand exactly what it is. Unfortunately, this is no simple task, as its mechanics are obscure and open to differing interpretations. While some scholars like Brian Bond believe the indirect approach cannot be applied to real-life cases at all because it is so abstract², I will do my best to overcome this difficulty by presenting a general and simplified version of the indirect approach. For the sake of clarity, it makes sense to chart the logic of the indirect approach backwards (i.e., from its desired end to its initial phases).

The first key aspect of the indirect approach to recognize is that it is a general *military* strategy, which means that it does not operate at the grand strategic level of warfare. Grand strategy has to do with defining the state’s political objectives in a war and specifying what military *and* nonmilitary means (e.g., financial, commercial, diplomatic, and ethical) will be employed to achieve those objectives.³ The indirect approach takes the political goals of a war as

² Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 1977).

³ Paul Kennedy, “Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition,” in *Grand*

fixed and is solely focused on how to utilize military means to achieve the state's political ends. Consequently, the indirect approach can operate at the theater level (the use of campaigns to win wars), operational level (the use of battles to win campaigns), and/or tactical level (the conduct of individual battles) of warfare.⁴

A second important feature of Liddell Hart's indirect approach is how it conceptualizes the purpose of military strategy. Carl von Clausewitz, the famous Prussian general and military theorist, defined strategy as "the use of engagements (i.e., battles) for the object of the war."⁵ Liddell Hart, however, dislikes this definition because it assumes that battle and the use of brute force are the only means to achieve your political ends in war.⁶ Instead, he believes you can achieve your objectives without using physical force and the true purpose of military strategy is to diminish the possibility of enemy resistance *before the fight actually occurs*.⁷ As Sun Tzu, the famous Chinese general and military strategist, said, "A victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning."⁸ This concept is one of the strengths of the indirect approach since it rightly emphasizes the importance of pre-planning in war. A perfect military strategy (and the optimal outcome of the indirect approach), then, reduces the ability of the enemy to resist so effectively that they surrender before the fight actually begins.⁹ This is the best outcome of military strategy since it allows you to disarm your enemy without having to suffer the costs of battle (e.g., money and lives).¹⁰ The belief that bloodless war is possible and preferable is another strength of the indirect approach, as it provides a counterpoint to those who assert that war is an inherently bloody affair and there is no other alternative. A near perfect military strategy (and the second best outcome of the indirect approach) puts you in such a strong position vis-à-vis your enemy that, even if he does not surrender before the battle begins, your victory in the battle is essentially

Strategies in War and Peace, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 2-3.

⁴ Stephen Biddle, "Strategy in War," *Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 3 (2007): 462-464.

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. & ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 128.

⁶ Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 333.

⁷ Ibid. 337.

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 87.

⁹ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 338.

¹⁰ Ibid. 338.

guaranteed.¹¹ In order to carry out a successful indirect approach, the question then becomes: How do you diminish the possibility of enemy resistance before the battle occurs?

In order to degrade your opponent's ability to resist before the battle occurs, the indirect approach calls for "dislocating" your enemy, or disturbing his equilibrium, both physically and psychologically.¹² Physical dislocation involves positioning your forces against a weak point of your enemy.¹³ For example, if you manage to outflank your opponent and threaten his supply chains, his ability to resist will be diminished because your move has the potential to reduce or completely cut off the flow of critical matériel like food, water, and ammunition to him. Therefore, physical dislocation directly diminishes the possibility of enemy resistance. It also indirectly reduces the enemy's ability to resist by causing psychological dislocation, which is the sensation of hopelessness that forms in the enemy commander's mind after he realizes the effects that physical dislocation will have on his forces (e.g., that they will not be adequately supplied).¹⁴ Since it is more difficult for the enemy commander to muster the energy necessary to rally his troops and prepare countermoves when he is discouraged and feels trapped, psychological dislocation also degrades your opponent's ability to resist. The concepts of physical and psychological dislocation provide valuable insights about how to gain an advantage over your opponent, and when they are successfully achieved, history has shown that they are effective.

Before we discuss how to dislocate your enemy's forces, it is important to recognize what types of actions do not cause dislocation and thus are not examples of the indirect approach. For instance, planning to attack your opponent head on when he more or less expects it (also known as the direct approach) is one such case. Since your enemy is physically and mentally prepared for a frontal assault (no military wants to be attacked from the side or the rear), engaging your opponent in this manner is striking them at their point of greatest strength and resistance rather than their point of vulnerability.¹⁵ Instead of threatening

¹¹ Ibid. 339.

¹² Ibid. 339.

¹³ Ibid. 339-340.

¹⁴ Ibid. 340.

¹⁵ Ibid. 340.

their supply routes, you are pushing your enemy back towards them.¹⁶ Instead of reducing the morale of the enemy commander, you may be raising it because a frontal assault is the kind of attack he was planning on encountering all along. According to Liddell Hart, frontal assaults without any element of surprise do not cause dislocation and thus are not examples of the indirect approach.

Returning to the mechanics of the indirect approach, dislocation of enemy forces is produced by finding the path of least resistance. Only by *discovering* a weak spot of your enemy can you understand how to actually disturb his physical equilibrium.¹⁷ As discussed above, Liddell Hart believes that the enemy's side and rear are the weakest parts of his formation. For him, the enemy's front, where he expects to be attacked and has likely built up his strongest defenses, is presumably the path of most, not least, resistance.

The final link in our causal chain of the (simplified) indirect approach is that in order to identify the path of least resistance, you must first find the path of least expectation. If you simply take what appears to be the obvious path of least resistance, then the enemy may have already identified this as their weak point and prepared for an attack along it.¹⁸ Accordingly, what seemed to be the path of least resistance may cease to be. Identifying the path of least expectation should be causally prior to finding the path of least resistance. Surprise, then, is the central component of the indirect approach. Without surprise, your enemy will be able to identify where he is vulnerable and take steps to prevent you from physically (and therefore psychologically) dislocating him. This logic is another one of the strengths of the indirect approach since it takes into account one of the central lessons of game theory, which is that in order to choose a winning strategy you must consider what is rational for your opponent to do given what you are doing. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the indirect approach is a compelling and useful military strategy, it is not a panacea and its dependence on surprise can cause significant disadvantages.

¹⁶ Ibid. 341.

¹⁷ Ibid. 341.

¹⁸ Ibid. 341.

Figure 1: Simplified Causal Map of the Indirect Approach

THEORETICAL FLAWS WITH THE INDIRECT APPROACH

Though there are many potential sources of weakness with the indirect approach that can reduce its effectiveness¹⁹, this paper will focus on exploring its reliance on surprise. As we will soon see, it may not be possible to successfully surprise your opponent, and the methods used to try and achieve surprise can often put you in a worse position relative to adopting a more direct approach. One of the principal reasons for these flaws with the indirect approach is the presence of “friction” in war. As Clausewitz, who coined the term, said, “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”²⁰ While it seems easy enough in theory to trick your opponent in order to place yourself in a favorable position before the battle occurs, in practice it is much more difficult. Why it is more difficult corresponds to friction. I begin by arguing that “fog,” one of the three classical components of friction, can prevent military commanders from discovering the path of least expectation and achieving surprise. I then argue that the common methods employed to achieve surprise (taking the psychologically scarier path, taking the physically harder path, diversion, and secrecy) can decrease battlefield effectiveness.

¹⁹ For example, enemy commanders may be less susceptible to psychological attacks than Liddell Hart assumes (Bidwell, *Modern Warfare*, 1973).

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 119.

Implicit Assumption of Accurate & Ample Information

In order to find the path of least expectation and surprise your opponent, you need to have relatively good intelligence on your enemy.²¹ Without understanding (to some extent) how your enemy's forces are distributed, what capabilities the enemy has, and what strategies the enemy commander is pursuing, there is little hope of achieving surprise. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done since there are some types of information that are inherently difficult to acquire (e.g., you can never know exactly what is going on in someone else's mind), and in war you have an enemy that is actively trying to deceive you. Remember, your opponent can also try and use the indirect approach to trick you! The problem of incorrect and/or incomplete intelligence in war is known as fog.²² If fog prevents military commanders from successfully surprising their opponents, then the promised benefits of adopting the indirect approach (physical and psychological dislocation) are unlikely to materialize. Consequently, fog is one of the reasons why employing a strategy based on the indirect approach may not lead to victory on the battlefield. Be that as it may, it should be noted that fog by itself is *not* one of the reasons why using an indirect approach can lead to worse outcomes than a more direct approach. Since adopting a direct approach will only lead to surprise by accident (it does not do so by design), fog just serves to (sometimes) level the playing field between the two strategies. If neither strategy leads to the benefits of surprise (physical and psychological dislocation), then we cannot say, all else equal, which is superior. In the next section, I will illustrate how imperfect information prevented the Japanese from successfully surprising the Americans at Midway, and how this contributed to their defeat.

Typical Methods Used to Achieve Surprise

To successfully surprise your opponent, one method that can be used is to take the psychologically scarier path. For example, your adversary may not expect you to engage in dangerous activities like night attacks and parachuting behind enemy lines.²³ Consequently, to achieve surprise you may have to do just that. The

²¹ Stephanie Markam, *Intelligence & Surprise: The Battle of Midway* (Newport: Naval War College, 1993), 9.

²² Ibid. 117. Note that incorrect intelligence is when you have information that is wrong, while incomplete intelligence refers to a situation where the intelligence you have is accurate, but there is important intelligence that you do not possess.

²³ Edward Luttwak, *The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8.

problem with this method is that it can intensify the second classical component of friction, “fear.” This is a significant problem in war because you have an enemy that is actively trying to injure or kill you, and so fear of death or injury can cause soldiers to be less effective fighters. As Clausewitz asserted, it is difficult to keep your composure and think rationally when there are bullets whizzing past your head and some of your friends and fellow soldiers lie injured or dead beside you.²⁴ If taking a more direct approach reduces soldiers’ fear by avoiding scary activities, then their performance on the battlefield should be enhanced and the direct approach may be a superior strategy.

Another method that can be utilized to achieve surprise is to take the physically harder path. For example, to surprise your opponent you may need to move your troops through a desert rather than on a road, as your enemy might not anticipate you would do such a crazy thing!²⁵ The problem with this method is that it can intensify the final classical component of friction, “fatigue.” This is a noteworthy problem in war because your enemy will attempt to weaken you by any means necessary, including starvation and physical exhaustion.²⁶ If soldiers are fatigued before the battle begins, then they obviously will not be as effective fighters during the battle. Therefore, if taking a more direct approach reduces soldiers’ fatigue by avoid physically taxing routes (e.g., by taking the road instead), then their battlefield efficiency should improve and the direct approach may be a superior strategy.

A third method that might be employed to generate surprise is diversion. According to Liddell Hart, in order to surprise your enemy and achieve physical dislocation, you often need to distract the enemy commander’s mind and divert his resources to unprofitable ends by means of one or a series of diversions.²⁷ For example, you might first attack your enemy’s northern forces to distract him from your true target, which are his southern forces. The problem with diversion is that it reduces the amount of force available for the main target of your attack.²⁸ This is an even more serious problem when the enemy does not take the bait of your diversion, as then you have weakened your own forces without

²⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 113.

²⁵ Luttwak, *The Logic of War and Peace*, 9.

²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 115.

²⁷ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 341.

²⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 203 and Luttwak, *The Logic of War and Peace*, 10.

gaining anything substantive in return. In war, where battles are won and lost by the smallest of margins, even tiny differences in force can mean the difference between victory and defeat. Again, utilizing a direct approach would mitigate this problem, as there should be no need for diversion since the direct approach is not concerned with achieving surprise. The Battle of Midway case study will show that the decision by the Japanese to attempt a diversion, as well as disperse their fleet for the sake of surprise, was a critical mistake that contributed to their defeat on the battlefield. Note that dispersion of forces falls under the general category of diversion if the purpose of dispersion is to divert the enemy commander's attention away from your true plan and maintain and/or enhance surprise. Since this was the goal of Japan's decision to disperse their fleet, it qualifies as a type of diversion.

The final method I will discuss here that may be used to achieve and/or maintain surprise is secrecy. Obviously, in order to surprise your opponent, you need to keep your plans secret. Secrecy, however, entails significant disadvantages. For example, it may prompt you to reduce the amount of communications between your own soldiers in order to prevent the enemy from intercepting your messages and discovering your plan. Though this may enhance surprise, it also reduces the ability of your own forces to coordinate and thus might decrease their effectiveness. For example, a lack of coordination can lead to some commanders not having the most up-to-date information, which may cause tactical and/or strategic mistakes. Alternatively, direct approaches should prioritize coordination over secrecy and therefore not face this issue. Japan's experience at Midway will demonstrate how an intense concern for secrecy motivated by the indirect approach can lead to significant military costs due to lack of coordination.

I will now turn to the Battle of Midway to provide empirical evidence for my main critiques of the indirect approach — that the promised benefits of surprise do not always materialize, that the methods used to try and achieve surprise can lead to significant military drawbacks, that it does not always lead to military victory, and that it is not always superior to direct approaches. The Battle will also provide evidence that, specifically, the problems related to fog, diversion, and secrecy contributed to the failure of the indirect approach in this case.

CASE STUDY: THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

The Battle of Midway (June 4–7, 1942) was one of the most critical naval battles fought between America and Japan in World War II. While Japan attempted to utilize an indirect approach in this battle to deal a decisive blow to the U.S.

Navy in the Pacific, it was Japan that ended up suffering a terrible defeat. In this section, I will first explain why this case was chosen over others. I will then describe how Japan's Midway Operation resembled an indirect approach. Third, I will make an argument about why Japan lost the Battle of Midway. Finally, I will present and preemptively respond to alternative explanations to my argument.

Case Selection: Why Midway?

Before diving into the details of the case, it makes sense to explain why it was specifically chosen. There are four main reasons why this case was chosen instead of others. First, as I will argue below, in my estimation Japan's strategy in this Battle was a clear example of the indirect approach, as it was heavily reliant on surprise and employed traditional indirect approach tactics like diversions and heightened secrecy. This clarity is preferable to a case where surprise is not the predominant feature of the military strategy and thus it is questionable whether the case can be used to test the indirect approach. Second, the fact that the Japanese outnumbered the Americans in terms of aircraft carriers, ships, and planes makes this a more than plausible test case of the indirect approach.²⁹ We should not expect the indirect approach to somehow magically allow Luxembourg to defeat the U.S. military in battle, but it could (and should in some proponents' opinion) tip the scales in a relatively even fight. Third, since the outcome of the Battle of Midway was so devastating for Japan even though they were about evenly matched with the U.S. in terms of forces, it is much easier to examine the counter-factual of how they would have fared if they employed a more direct approach. Clearly, something went horribly wrong for the Japanese in this Battle, and thus we should be able to direct blame somewhere. Fourth, several factors related to the indirect approach's dependence on surprise led to Japan's defeat in the Battle, which means that we can substantiate several of the theoretical defects of the indirect approach hypothesized above.

Japan's Military Strategy & Why It Was an Indirect Approach

The motivation for the Midway Operation was the failure of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to destroy any of America's aircraft carriers, which just

²⁹ Dallas Woodbury Isom, *Midway Inquest: Why the Japanese Lost the Battle of Midway* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 2, 3, 95, 100.

happened to not be there that day.³⁰ If Japan was to have any hope of winning the war, they needed to destroy the American carrier fleet as soon as possible.³¹ Consequently, the most important goal of the Midway Operation was not to capture the Midway Islands, but to destroy the American carrier fleet.³² Doing so would likely knock America out of the Pacific for at least a year, which would give Japan the time and space to exploit the oil and other resources of Southeast Asia.³³ This was of critical importance to Japan because they had previously depended on U.S. oil exports to fuel their military, but the American government cut off their supply in August 1941 with a full embargo.³⁴

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, was chosen to lead the operation. His plan was to use an attack on Midway as a trap to lure the American carriers in so that they could be destroyed in one decisive battle. Although the Midway Islands are just six miles in diameter, they were a vital air base and refueling point for the American military in the mid-Pacific³⁵. Furthermore, because of their proximity to Hawaii, anyone who controlled the Islands also threatened important military bases on Hawaii like Pearl Harbor and, by extension, the U.S. west coast.³⁶ For these reasons, the Japanese were confident that an attack on Midway would induce the Americans to send their carriers to defend or retake the Islands.³⁷

³⁰ Paul Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 20.

³¹ Isom, *Midway*, 91.

³² Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle that Doomed Japan, The Japanese Navy's Story* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1955), 78.

³³ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 91 and Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 19-20.

³⁴ Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 18.

³⁵ Walter Boyne, *Clash of Titans: World War II at Sea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 179.

³⁶ Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 78.

³⁷ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 92.

Figure 2:

(Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History, "Aleutian Islands")

The specifics of Yamamoto's plan were as follows. First, he planned on launching an attack on the Aleutian Islands, which are north of the Midway Islands, on June 3.³⁸ This attack would serve two purposes. The first was to divert American attention and naval forces away from Midway.³⁹ Just as the indirect approach prescribes, Yamamoto wanted to use an attack on the Aleutian Islands as a way to distract the Americans from his true objective, which was to destroy the American carrier fleet. This would, theoretically, enhance the surprise of his true operation and therefore make it easier to destroy the American carriers and capture Midway. The second reason for this attack was that the Japanese Naval

³⁸ Ibid. 238.

³⁹ Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, 134, 138.

General Staff was worried that the Americans would launch an invasion of the north Japanese islands from the Aleutians, and thus they wanted to capture the Islands or neutralize them as a military base to counter this threat.⁴⁰

The second part of Yamamoto's plan was to launch an air attack against American forces on Midway on June 4, followed by a ground invasion two days later.⁴¹ Admiral Chichi Nagumo (who oversaw the attack on Pearl Harbor) was tasked with leading this portion of the offensive. His force was the core of the entire operation, as it contained four of Japan's six attack aircraft carriers, which had about 225 operational planes between them.⁴² As mentioned before, the primary aim of this part of the operation was to draw the American carrier fleet to the Midway Islands, while the secondary objective was to actually capture the Islands. Nevertheless, the Japanese did assume that they could capture the Islands before the American carriers arrived.⁴³

The third component of the plan involved Yamamoto himself. While Nagumo launched his attack against Midway, Yamamoto, with the three most powerful battleships in the Japanese Navy, would be 300 miles to the west.⁴⁴ While it might seem strange that the Japanese decided to disperse their strength, Yamamoto believed that dividing his force would reduce the chances that American reconnaissance assets in the Pacific would discover the true extent and purpose of the Midway Operation. Again, as the indirect approach recommends, this action was taken to deceive the enemy and preserve the surprise of the Japanese attack.

If all went according to plan, the American carrier fleet would rush to Midway to recapture it, and Nagumo and Yamamoto's forces would be waiting there to ambush them. With the American Pacific fleet severely crippled, the Japanese would have free reign in the Pacific for a year and would be one step closer to winning the war. Therefore, the Japanese plan was operating not only at the tactical level of warfare, but also at the operational and strategic levels. The Midway Operation was related to the operational level of warfare because the Japanese were attempting to link together a series of battles (the attack on the Aleutian Islands, the attack on the Midway Islands, and the planned attack on

⁴⁰ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 92.

⁴¹ Gordon Prange, Donald Goldstein, and Katherine Dillon, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 32-33.

⁴² Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 93.

⁴³ Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, 133.

⁴⁴ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 33.

the U.S. carrier fleet) in order to gain a decisive advantage in their campaign to control the Pacific Ocean. The plan also was operating at the theater level of warfare because the Japanese needed to control the Pacific in order to exploit the resources of Southeast Asia and thus have a chance of winning the war. While the broad scope of the Midway Operation meant that if it was successful it would be a great victory for the Japanese, it also meant that the consequences of failure would be much more catastrophic.

While Liddell Hart implies that Japan's Midway Operation was not a true indirect approach because, by committing themselves to an attack on Midway at a specific time, it lacked flexibility, I contend that it strongly resembles an indirect approach in at least some critical respects.⁴⁵ The Japanese were clearly trying to take the path of least expectation to destroy the American aircraft carriers, as their entire strategy was predicated on surprise, deception, and misdirection. By taking the path of least expectation, the Japanese hoped to find the path of least resistance and dislocate the Americans. They thought their strategy would achieve physical dislocation by concentrating a superior Japanese force against a relatively weaker American force, and psychological dislocation by catching the Americans unawares. These factors would presumably reduce the Americans' ability to resist and facilitate Japan's eventual victory in the battle. However, though Yamamoto's plan seemed flawless in theory, in practice he would have been better off adopting a direct approach.

Why Japan Lost the Battle of Midway

The root cause of the colossal Japanese failure at Midway was that their operation was not actually a surprise. Prior to the battle, the Americans had partially broken the Japanese communication code (known as JN25) and roughly knew what the Japanese had planned.⁴⁶ While the indirect approach assumes that you can find the path of least expectation, because of the fog of war (the Japanese did not know the Americans had broken their code), this can be extremely difficult, if not impossible. If fog was a non-issue, then the Japanese could have fed false information to the Americans and therefore achieved surprise in a different manner. Nevertheless, this is not how events unfolded, and therefore the Japanese did not obtain the promised benefits of the indirect

⁴⁵ Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: Putnam, 1971), 349-350.

⁴⁶ Prange et al., *Miracle at Midway*, 19, 37.

approach.

Specifically, the fact that the Americans knew of Yamamoto's plan had two directly negative consequences. The first was that any psychological dislocation the Japanese may have achieved due to surprise was negated. Instead of being the victim of surprise, it was the U.S. commander, Admiral Chester Nimitz, that did the surprising.⁴⁷ The second was that when the Japanese arrived at Midway, the American carrier fleet would already be there, waiting to ambush them. As previously mentioned, the Japanese had hoped to neutralize American forces on Midway *before* having to confront the American carrier fleet. Consequently, it was the Americans that physically dislocated the Japanese rather than the other way around.

Even though these were serious problems, the fact that the Midway Operation was not a surprise to the Americans did not directly doom the Japanese since they outnumbered the Americans in terms of ships and planes, and they could have won the battle even without the element of surprise.⁴⁸ Moreover, even after discovering the Japanese plan, the Americans still sent their carriers to defend Midway, which is exactly what Yamamoto wanted. What really condemned the Japanese to an awful defeat were the methods they used – secrecy, dispersion, and diversion — to maintain and enhance the surprise of their plan. Since this was a folly because the Americans had broken their code, these actions only served to weaken their force in exactly the manner discussed in the previous section. Alternatively, if Japan had embraced a direct approach that eschewed the need for surprise, it would not have suffered the negative consequences of these actions and would have fared better in the Battle. This would have been the case even if the Americans were still intercepting Japan's communications and knew they planned to use a direct rather than an indirect approach. The reason is that a direct approach would not have called for secrecy, dispersion, or diversion.

The first critical mistake made by the Japanese, which followed precisely from the indirect approach's emphasis on surprise, was to refrain from ship-to-ship radio communications as much as possible during their sortie from Japan to Midway in order to prevent the Americans from intercepting their messages and learning about their plan (which, of course, they already knew about). During this journey, there were many signs that the attack on Midway was no longer a secret.

⁴⁷ Markam, *Intelligence & Surprise: The Battle of Midway*, 1.

⁴⁸ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 100.

Early on in the voyage, Yamamoto's fleet encountered American submarines, and the next day the Japanese intercepted a message sent by an American submarine to Midway.⁴⁹ At the very least, the Americans knew that a large group of Japanese battleships was headed somewhere in the Pacific. Then, on June 1, because of dense fog (the literal, not metaphorical kind), Yamamoto had to break radio silence to ascertain where his oil tanker was located in order to refuel.⁵⁰ This gave the Americans an opportunity to intercept Yamamoto's message and determine his location. Later that day, Japanese radio intelligence found a sharp increase in radio traffic coming from Hawaii, suggesting that the Americans might be preparing to send naval forces from Pearl Harbor.⁵¹ That same day, a Japanese patrol plane encountered a Midway-based American patrol plane 700 miles west of Midway, indicating that the Americans had increased the radius of their reconnaissance flights.⁵² On June 2, Yamamoto received an urgent message from the Naval General Staff in Tokyo that the Americans were probably aware of the Midway operation and might be rushing carriers to Midway in order to ambush the Japanese.⁵³ By this point, Yamamoto realized that the Americans probably knew about the planned attack on Midway and therefore it would not be a surprise. The problem was that Nagumo, whose carriers' radio receivers were much weaker than Yamamoto's, had not received this report from Tokyo and knew nothing about the other incidents described above.⁵⁴ Despite the fact that Nagumo had requested Yamamoto to relay any important intelligence to him, Yamamoto, in the interest of secrecy, made the fateful decision not to inform Nagumo that the Americans probably knew of their plans.⁵⁵ Essentially, Yamamoto was worried that the Americans might intercept a message sent to Nagumo, which would diminish whatever remaining surprise the operation might have left. As a consequence of Yamamoto's decision to prioritize surprise, Nagumo believed that the Americans were unaware of the Midway Operation and that there would be no American carriers in the area when he launched his attack against American forces on Midway. This assumption was one of the

⁴⁹ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 121-122.

⁵⁰ Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 126.

⁵¹ Ibid. 122.

⁵² Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 139.

⁵³ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 98.

⁵⁴ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 145.

⁵⁵ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 96-99.

main reasons why the Japanese lost the Battle of Midway. If Japan had instead employed a direct approach that did not highly value surprise, then Yamamoto would have prioritized coordination over surprise and this error likely would not have occurred.

On June 4, at 4:30 a.m., Nagumo launched his attack against American forces on Midway. He had hoped to catch American planes on the ground and destroy them all before the Americans even knew what was happening.⁵⁶ For this mission, Nagumo allotted about half his planes. The other half (including the critical torpedo planes) were held back in case any American carriers made an early appearance, at which point Nagumo would want enough planes to defend himself.⁵⁷ The plan started to unravel when the first wave of Japanese planes failed to eliminate American aircraft on the ground, as the Americans knew the attack was coming. Nagumo then made the catastrophic decision to have the other half of his planes, which were earmarked for attack/defense against American carriers, refitted with *land* bombs so that they could strike military targets on Midway.⁵⁸ If Yamamoto had informed Nagumo that the Americans had likely discovered the operation and might be rushing carriers to Midway's defense, Nagumo probably would not have disarmed his strongest weapon against American carriers (his torpedo planes).⁵⁹ However, by the time American carriers started attacking Nagumo's forces it was too late, as it is time-consuming to rearm torpedo planes.⁶⁰ The American carriers were able to land a devastating first strike on Nagumo's forces, from which they could not recover. Alternatively, a direct approach would have put little or no value on achieving surprise, and thus Yamamoto would have had no good reason to withhold critical information from Nagumo in the interest of extreme secrecy. Therefore, this mistake could have been avoided if a direct approach was taken.

The second crucial mistake the Japanese made was to disperse their fleet in the interest of deception and surprise. Since Yamamoto's battleships were 300 miles to the west of Nagumo's carriers on June 4, they were not able to come to their defense in time. If Yamamoto's powerful battleships had been there, then they could have screened Nagumo's carriers from American attacks and destroyed

⁵⁶ Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, 145.

⁵⁷ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 36.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 214.

⁵⁹ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 268-269.

⁶⁰ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 218.

many of the American planes with their immense firepower.⁶¹ Instead, it was the Americans who concentrated their fleet and were able to bring superior forces to bear at the Battle of Midway.⁶² Again, if the Japanese had been less concerned with achieving surprise and instead embraced a direct approach, then they would have concentrated their forces at Midway, their main strategic target, and avoided this issue. There would have been no strong rationale for dispersion, as the benefits of surprise would have been devalued.

The final consequential mistake made by the Japanese was the Aleutian diversion. Seeing that the Americans knew the main target of the Japanese operation was not the Aleutian Islands, the Americans did not let the attack distract their attention from where the true battle would be.⁶³ Therefore, the Japanese did not gain much from the Aleutian diversion, but they did lose the benefit of having those forces available for their main attack on Midway and against the American carriers. While the two carriers sent to the Aleutians did not have the capability to launch torpedo attack planes, they would have brought more Zeros (a powerful type of long-range fighter plane) to the battle, which would have enhanced Nagumo's ability to fend off American attack planes and provided his own attack planes with valuable escorts.⁶⁴ Once again, the Japanese's focus on surprise hurt them in the Battle, and a direct approach likely would have led to better results. There would have been no strong logic for diversion, as the benefits of surprise would have been devalued and more force would have been wanted for the main attack on Midway.

When all was said and done, in just over a day, the Japanese lost all four of Nagumo's carriers, while the Americans lost only one carrier, the Yorktown. The Battle of Midway was not just a failure for the Japanese; it was a catastrophe that probably sealed their fate.⁶⁵ If my argument that Japan's strategy adhered to the indirect approach is convincing, which I believe it is, then clearly the indirect approach does not always lead to victory on the battlefield. In fact, it can end in humiliating defeat. However, it did not have to be that way for the Japanese. According to naval intelligence officer and WWII historian Dallas Woodbury

⁶¹ Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 234.

⁶² Boyne, *Clash of Titans*, 183.

⁶³ Prange et. al., *Miracle at Midway*, 155.

⁶⁴ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 161, 238, 241.

⁶⁵ Fuchida & Okumiya, *The Battle that Doomed Japan*, 166.

Isom, if they had concentrated their strength and kept their eye on the real prize, which was the American carrier fleet, they most likely would have won the battle, albeit by a small margin.⁶⁶ Instead, their adherence to the indirect approach and its emphasis on surprise put them in a worse position than if they had pursued a more direct approach and concentrated their forces on Midway and the American carriers. The result was that the American forces were able to physically dislocate Japan by positioning themselves against a vulnerable point of the Japanese fleet, and psychologically dislocate them by achieving surprise. The indirect approach failed the Japanese at Midway, and they paid dearly for it.

Alternative Explanations

While I have argued that Japan utilized an indirect approach at the Battle of Midway, that this strategy failed miserably to achieve victory, and that Japan would have been better off adopting a more direct approach, it is essential to consider alternative explanations to my argument. One such alternative explanation could be that Japan did not actually adopt a “true” indirect approach at Midway, as Liddell Hart has asserted.⁶⁷ Given the abstract and convoluted mechanics of the indirect approach, this is an easier argument for critics to make. Nevertheless, I believe there are at least two convincing reasons to reject this potential criticism. The first is that even if the Japanese did not follow the exact letter of the indirect approach (if such a thing can even be ascertained), it clearly adhered to the essential spirit of the indirect approach and embraced many of its preferred tactics. This should be clear from the discussion above. The second reason to reject this criticism is that, if taken too far, it can bring us perilously close to circular reasoning: utilizing the indirect approach always leads to victory, and therefore any strategy that does not lead to victory cannot be a true indirect approach.⁶⁸

A second alternative explanation could be that the Japanese utilized an indirect approach, but it was their general incompetence rather than the strategy itself that led to battlefield failure. For example, a critic might argue that Japan should have better secured their communications to prevent the Americans from intercepting them. Or, perhaps the Japanese should have developed an enhanced intelligence-gathering system that would have revealed that the U.S. had cracked

⁶⁶ Isom, *Midway Inquest*, 151, 278.

⁶⁷ Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 349-350.

⁶⁸ Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*, 56.

the Japanese communication code.⁶⁹ If they had done either or both things, then the indirect approach may have succeeded for the Japanese at Midway. The problem with these arguments is that the fog of war, combined with general human limitations, means that lack of good information is ubiquitous in conflict. In other words, this problem is not just limited to the Japanese during WWII, but is a more general issue with the logic of the indirect approach. Consequently, the indirect approach's assumption that actors can find the path of least expectation can be wildly optimistic in many cases.

In line with this second alternative explanation, a critic might argue that the indirect approach only failed in this case because of the mental mistakes made by Yamamoto and Nagumo after the plan had been set in motion. There is certainly some evidence for this criticism, as the mental errors made by Yamamoto and Nagumo were undoubtedly an important factor in the Battle. Furthermore, in hindsight there were warning signs that Yamamoto and Nagumo could have recognized. If not for human error, then Yamamoto would have alerted Nagumo that the operation was no longer a surprise and Nagumo would never have refitted his planes with land bombs. However, it is important to remember that the argument in the theoretical section regarding secrecy is about how employing an indirect approach can increase the likelihood of human error! In the case of Midway, Japan's adoption of the indirect approach meant that Yamamoto and Nagumo were so focused on achieving surprise that they were willing to overlook the warning signs in order to maintain it. The need for secrecy led to a lack of coordination, which then caused an increase in the likelihood (and incidence) of human error. If they had instead adopted a direct approach that put little value on surprise, then the need for secrecy would have been diminished and the human error associated with a lack of coordination would have been lessened.

A fourth alternative explanation is that the Japanese did employ an indirect approach and it did fail to lead to victory, but that the Japanese also would have failed if they used a direct approach. The main piece of evidence for this argument likely would be that whether or not the Japanese had chosen to use an indirect approach, the Americans probably would have intercepted their communications and roughly known their plans. While it is impossible to know exactly how this counter-factual situation would have played out, there are several

⁶⁹ Markam, *Intelligence & Surprise: The Battle of Midway*, 16.

advantages the Japanese would have obtained from adopting an optimal direct approach. First, they would not have had to prioritize secrecy, and so they could have avoided Nagumo's decision to re-arm his planes with land bombs. Second, there would have been no need to disperse the fleet, and thus Yamamoto would have been able to bring his powerful battleships into the fight. The third reason is that there would have been no need for the Aleutian diversion, and therefore the Japanese would have had those carriers and their planes available for the Battle as well. Though it is possible the U.S. would have redirected more forces to Midway in this counter-factual scenario, it seems implausible that the Japanese would have suffered such a devastating defeat with a fully concentrated and coordinated force.

The final alternative explanation that will be explored here relates to the external validity of the Battle of Midway. Since this is only one case, we cannot learn from it whether most attempts at the indirect approach lead to victory or defeat, or whether for most battles, adopting a direct approach is preferable to other strategies. It may be that this case is an extreme outlier and that in almost all other cases the indirect approach is the optimal military strategy and leads to victory. It may also be possible that Midway is a mild outlier and that the indirect approach is the optimal military strategy and leads to victory a majority of the time, but there is a significant minority of instances where it is unsuccessful. We cannot really know unless additional cases are examined in-depth. Furthermore, this potential weakness of the paper is bolstered by the many notable historical cases where surprise was utilized to great effect (e.g., the Battle of Trenton in the Revolutionary War or Operation Focus in the Six-Day War). However, this limitation should not significantly diminish the results of this paper for a few reasons. First, this paper only makes limited claims, and thus its internal argument would not be invalidated even if Midway is a mild or extreme outlier. Second, we should probably expect to see lots of cases of successful surprise in the historical record, as indirect approach strategies are more likely to be adopted when the problems described in the previous section are less severe (i.e., there is a selection effect).⁷⁰ Finally, given the logically sound theoretical critiques made in the previous section, we should expect to find other cases where attempts at surprise backfired, or at least entailed significant costs.

⁷⁰ A critic could reasonably retort that weaker and more desperate states are also more likely to try and utilize surprise, which might result in an empirical bias towards failed cases of surprise. Of course, if both indirect and direct approaches are extremely unlikely to succeed, then surrender or negotiation is also possible.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has not been to argue that the indirect approach is a terrible strategy that never leads to victory. The indirect approach provides many valuable insights, and there are certainly many historical cases that demonstrate its utility. In fact, one might even consider the American strategy at Midway a kind of indirect approach. The real aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that the indirect approach does not *always* succeed on the battlefield, and to point out that it *can* fail due to its assumption that actors have accurate and ample information, and that the benefits of surprise outweigh the costs of the methods used to achieve it. Therefore, in deciding whether or not to utilize surprise, truly great military strategists carefully weigh its advantages and disadvantages in each case. In some situations, the disadvantages may surpass the advantages, and a more direct approach may lead to better results.

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