

Rapid Rhythm and Overambitious Objectives: The Dual Mismatch in Japan's Rising Process

Yifan Liu

School of International Relations, Beijing Language and Culture University

202111580349@stu.blcu.edu.cn

Abstract. On August 15, 1945, Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu signed the instrument of surrender, marking Japan's formal capitulation to the Allied forces. This surrender signaled the defeat of the Axis powers and effectively halted Japan's rising trajectory. Grounded in positional realism and the theory of strategic rhythm, this paper introduces a novel analytical framework to examine the discrepancies between strategic objectives and rhythm in Japan's rising process. Subsequently, the paper chronologically reviews Japan's historical ascent, utilizing this analytical lens to assess the alignment between Japan's early, middle, and late-stage strategic objectives with its comprehensive capabilities, as well as the congruence between objectives and strategic rhythm. The analysis suggests that Japan initially maintained a strategic equilibrium with appropriate objectives and rhythm. However, discrepancies emerged in the middle period between strategic objectives and rhythm, escalating to a misalignment between objectives and comprehensive capabilities in the later stages. This confluence of misalignments culminated in a "dual mismatch," ultimately interrupting Japan's rise.

Keywords: strategic objectives, strategic rhythm, dual mismatch

1. Literature Review: Objectives, Capabilities, and Rhythm

1.1. Objectives and Capabilities: An Analysis through Positional Realism

The scholarly discourse on the nexus between objectives and capabilities has witnessed extensive exploration. Works such as Yan Xuetong's Theory of Power Transition, Sun Xuefeng's Rise Dilemma Theory, and Yang Yuan's Balancing and Hedging Theory have each contributed to this discourse from varying perspectives. While these theories diverge in their approaches, they collectively assert that national interests are objective and, consequently, can be gauged relative to a state's capabilities.[1]

However, the relationship between objectives and capabilities isn't the central focus of these theories. The analysis of national interests merely serves as a foundation for subsequent logical deductions. In contrast, Song Wei's positional realism offers a concentrated theoretical examination of the correlation between a state's position within the international system and its overarching national interests, encapsulating a comprehensive synthesis of existing theoretical frameworks.

Positional realism categorizes states based on their power positions within the international system into four distinct types: hegemonic states, challenger states, potential challenger states, and non-challenger states. [2] According to positional realism, "A state, as a cohesive political entity, primarily realizes its national interests through its relationships with other states, thereby tying its potential gains to its position within the international system." [3] The theory further posits, "For hegemonic states, their overarching national interest lies in bolstering both their hegemonic power status and hegemonic order. Challenger states aspire to achieve hegemonic power and order status. As for potential challenger states, their primary national interest is to secure hegemonic power status, with the attainment of hegemonic order status being a long-term objective. Non-challenger states prioritize attaining dominant regional power and order status, especially concerning regional order dominance." [4]

1.2. Objectives and Rhythm: The Theory of Strategic Rhythm

Currently, the concept of strategic rhythm frequently emerges within the realms of business management and strategic studies,

often framed more as an art than as a social science concept in the field of international relations. Xu Jin has introduced this concept into international relations and advanced its scientific understanding through the Theory of Incremental Strategic Rhythm. The theory posits that strategic rhythm refers to the "rhythmic activities formed by decision-makers in dynamically executing policies by continuously observing the external strategic environment and leveraging their strategic capabilities to achieve strategic objectives." [5] The theory emphasizes, "The rhythm itself is neither right nor wrong. It is not about faster being better than slower or vice versa; rather, it concerns whether it aligns appropriately with the objectives." [6] In essence, for a state, the strategic rhythm that aligns with its strategic objectives and capabilities is deemed appropriate, while the one that doesn't is deemed inappropriate.

Xu Jin suggests that the choice of strategic rhythm by a nation is predominantly influenced by two subjective variables: the decision-makers' perception of the nation's strategic capabilities and the strategic environment. Here, the "strategic environment refers to the "objective conditions and factors influencing national security comprehensively during a specific period, encompassing but not limited to domestic and international political, economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical aspects." [7] In contrast, "strategic capabilities" denote the "capacity of a nation to achieve strategic objectives over a given period. This can be further bifurcated into national strength and strategic operational capabilities. While national strength pertains to tangible material power, strategic operational capabilities concern the proactive utilization of this strength by decision-makers to achieve strategic objectives. This relationship is multiplicative: Strategic Capability = National Strength × Strategic Operational Capabilities." [8]

The perceptions of decision-makers regarding the strategic environment can be accurate or flawed, while their understanding of comprehensive capabilities might be either rational or overestimated. Specifically, based on various combinations of these two subjective variables, strategic rhythm tends to manifest in several distinct states, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The Combinatorial Logic of Strategic Rhythm

		Capability Awareness	
		Accurate	Overestimation
Environmental Awareness	Correct	Appropriate	Too Rapid
	Incorrect	Too Rapid/Too Slow	Too Rapid

In summary, both the theories of positional realism and strategic rhythm provide invaluable strategic insights. Positional realism predominantly delves into how states with varying power standings within the international system define their overarching national interests and subsequently formulate long-term objectives. Conversely, the theory of strategic rhythm underscores the necessity of maintaining an appropriate and judicious rhythm during the pursuit of these objectives. By synergistically integrating these two frameworks, one can derive a comprehensive analytical model endowed with both normative and explanatory power. Such an amalgamation offers burgeoning states a nuanced blueprint for rational objective delineation and the adept calibration of strategic tempo, thereby optimizing their prospects for a successful ascent in the international hierarchy.

1.3. Conceptual Overlap and Conceptual Ambiguity: Different Outcomes from Similar Causes?

Positional realism and the theory of strategic rhythm focus respectively on the formulation and achievement of objectives. While the processes of objective formulation and tempo setting appear to operate independently with their distinct influencing factors, they are not mutually exclusive. Xu Jin's evaluation of Napoleon's failure elucidates this: "Even if a strategy sets an inappropriate objective, executing it with appropriate tempo still culminates in failure. For instance, Napoleon aimed to control all of Europe in the shortest time possible, leading to exhaustive mobilizations and relentless campaigns that drained national strength, culminating in his downfall. His high-intensity, rapid strategic tempo perfectly aligned with his strategic objectives. Thus, while the tempo matched the objective, the failure stemmed from erroneous objective-setting." [9] Xu Jin posits that incorrect strategic objective formulation might still align with an appropriate strategic tempo, implying that the formulation of objectives doesn't necessarily affect tempo setting.

However, upon scrutinizing Xu Jin's definition of the strategic environment, which he delineates as: "The strategic environment refers to the objective conditions and situations that influence a nation's overall security landscape during a specific period, encompassing aspects such as domestic and international politics, economy, diplomacy, and geopolitics," [10] this article contends, given the context, that Xu Jin's conceptualization of the strategic environment essentially encapsulates a power balance relationship. Moreover, the so-called 'perception of the strategic environment' equates to the subjective understanding of this power balance by decision-makers, [11] thus inherently overlapping with the concept of 'strategic power perception.' Consequently, the sole variable influencing strategic tempo is the perception of this power balance.

A more salient question emerges: if a nation's strategic objectives and tempo are both determined by perceptions of a certain power balance, why does similar perception concurrently result in appropriate objective formulation and inappropriate tempo setting? Are objective formulation and tempo setting truly independent of each other?

2. Analytical Framework: The Relationship between Strategic Objectives, Strategic Rhythm, and Comprehensive Capabilities

To address this question, this paper constructs an analytical framework that integrates positional realism with the theory of strategic rhythm. Before elaborating on the specifics of this framework, it is essential to standardize various concepts that may have similar meanings but different expressions and introduce some new terms.

Firstly, what positional realism refers to as a country's overall national interests signifies a nation's long-term strategic interests and the objectives it aims to achieve. Therefore, within this analytical framework, we rename the overall national interests of positional realism as "strategic objectives," while retaining the same essence. Secondly, the concept of strategic capabilities in the theory of strategic rhythm and the comprehensive capabilities concept in positional realism are quite similar in structure and essence. [12] Hence, there's no need to introduce a new term. When discussing capabilities in this context, we will directly adopt the comprehensive capabilities concept from positional realism. Thirdly, to address the earlier question of "same cause, different outcomes," this paper distinguishes the capability comparison relationship into two aspects: the overall position of comprehensive capabilities and the specific capability differences. The concept of the overall position of comprehensive capabilities aligns with the idea in positional realism, denoting a macro-level capability order that categorizes countries based on their comprehensive capabilities into hegemonic, contender, potential contender, and non-contender nations. The specific capability difference refers to the difference in capabilities between two specific countries, indicating how much one's capabilities exceed or fall short of another's. Recognizing the overall position and specific disparities in comprehensive capabilities refers to a decision-maker's subjective understanding of this objective situation. To put it simply, if capabilities are likened to exam scores, the overall position of comprehensive capabilities refers to a ranking of scores, while specific capability differences indicate how many points differ between two different rankings.

The paper argues that decision-makers, in formulating appropriate strategic objectives while simultaneously establishing a fitting strategic rhythm, need to possess accurate subjective perceptions of their nation's overall position of comprehensive capabilities and the specific disparities in these capabilities.

Specifically, if decision-makers overestimate or underestimate the specific disparities in their nation's comprehensive capabilities, even if they set appropriate strategic objectives, they might still establish a rhythm that is either too fast or too slow. This can lead to situations where the country fails to achieve its strategic objectives due to excessive mobilization intensity or rapid rhythm, or conversely, inadequate mobilization intensity or slow rhythm. If decision-makers overestimate or underestimate their nation's overall position in comprehensive capabilities, despite setting the right strategic rhythm, they might set objectives that are either too ambitious or too modest. This could lead to scenarios where the country's resources are exhausted, or it becomes passive, resulting in a collapse or damage to national interests. Refer to Table 2 for more detail

Table 2. Combinatorial Logic of Strategic Objective Formulation and Rhythm Setting

		Perception of Specific Disparities in Comprehensive Capabilities			
		Overestimate one's own comprehensive capabilities		Underestimate one's own comprehensive capabilities	
		Overestimating Advantage	Underestimating Disparity	Underestimating Advantage	Overestimating Disparity
Perception of Overall Comprehensive Capabilities Position	Correct	Objective is Appropriate, Rhythm is Adequate.	Objective is Appropriate, Rhythm is Too Rapid.	Objective is Appropriate, Rhythm is Too Slow.	
	Overestimate	Objective is Overambitious, Rhythm is Adequate.	Objective is Overambitious, Rhythm is Too Rapid.	Objective is Overambitious, Rhythm is Too Slow.	
	Underestimate	Objective is Too Modest, Rhythm is Adequate.	Objective is Too Modest, Rhythm is Too Rapid.	Objective is Too Modest, Rhythm is Too Slow.	

3. Empirical Examination: A Case Study of Japan's Rise

3.1. Overview: Three Periods of Japan's Rise Process

Japan's rise can be traced from the Meiji Restoration to its defeat in the Showa era, broadly categorized into three distinct periods:

early, middle, and late periods. Specifically, the early period spans from the Meiji Restoration to the Mukden Incident (or Manchurian Incident) of 1931. The middle period extends from the Mukden Incident to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and the late period encompasses the time from the attack on Pearl Harbor to the formal surrender. Throughout these periods, Japan's strategic objectives, comprehensive capabilities, and strategic rhythms varied significantly.

In the early period of its rise, while Japan often exhibited a mindset of "gambling its national destiny," this was essentially rooted in a lack of confidence in its own decisions. However, objectively, Japan maintained a relatively stable strategic posture with appropriate strategic objectives and rhythms. Moving to the middle period, Japan had a correct understanding of its macro position in comprehensive capabilities, thereby formulating accurate strategic objectives. Yet, successes from the early period led some decision-makers to overestimate Japan's comprehensive capabilities, resulting in a rhythm that was too rapid. In the later period of Japan's rise, a pervasive national enthusiasm led to an overestimation of its macro position in comprehensive capabilities and an underestimation of its capability gaps. Consequently, Japan set overly ambitious strategic objectives and established an overly swift strategic rhythm, leading to a "double misalignment" between strategic objectives and comprehensive capabilities, as well as between strategic objectives and strategic rhythm. This "double misalignment" ultimately culminated in the interruption of Japan's rise.

3.2. Overall Steadiness: The Restoration and Ambitions of Japan's Early Rise Period

In 1868, Japan's comprehensive capabilities were even inferior to that of the Qing Dynasty and certainly couldn't rival the dominant power of the time, Britain. Therefore, in terms of its overall position in comprehensive capabilities, Japan was unequivocally a non-hegemonic state. The strategic objective for such a non-hegemonic nation would be to attain regional dominance and leadership, particularly in establishing a leading order within its region. During this period, Japan aimed solely to become the order-setter in Asia. Through the Meiji Restoration, it implemented a series of modernization reforms to consistently enhance its comprehensive capabilities and elevate its position. Japan appropriately formulated its strategic objectives during this era.

When examining the specific disparities in comprehensive capabilities, Japan held a significant advantage over Ryukyu, a slight edge over Korea, and a notable gap but merely in terms of quantity with the Qing Dynasty. However, Japan faced a considerable and even qualitative disparity with Tsarist Russia. Thus, a suitable strategic rhythm would involve defeating adversaries with the most significant advantages first and those with the most considerable gaps in the long run. Aligning with this logic, Japan progressed in the following order: Ryukyu, Korea, the Qing Dynasty, and then Tsarist Russia. Starting with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan's capabilities grew exponentially. By 1875, Japan had control over Ryukyu; by 1876, it had intervened in Korea. In 1894, Japan defeated the Qing Dynasty, gaining privileges in China and annexing Taiwan while having substantial influence over Korea. By 1905, Japan emerged victorious against Tsarist Russia, securing privileges in southern Manchuria. Subsequently, Japan abolished a series of unequal treaties with Western powers and even defeated German forces in Qingdao during World War I, solidifying its status as a victorious nation.

3.3. Rapid Rhythm: The Mismatch Between Strategic Rhythm and Objectives in Japan's Mid-Term Rise Period

3.3.1. Japan's Mid-Term Strategic Objectives in Its Rise

By the 1930s, Japan's comprehensive capabilities had seen significant enhancement. Beyond its mainland, Japan held territories such as Taiwan, Korea, and parts of Micronesia. In regions like Manchuria, Japan possessed several special interests, including railways and stationed troops. In terms of its overall position in comprehensive capabilities, Japan had at least entered the threshold of a potential hegemonic nation. The strategic objective for a potential hegemonic state is to prioritize attaining hegemonic power status and achieving regional dominance when no hegemonic power intervenes in the area. Hegemonic order status serves merely as an ultimate objective.

During this period, Japan's strategic objectives could be succinctly summarized by a passage from the Tanaka Memorial: "To conquer China, one must first conquer Manchuria; to conquer the world, one must first conquer China. If China is entirely conquered by our nation, other nations such as those in Central Asia, India, and Southeast Asia will respect and submit to us." [13] Considering the declarative nature of this text and the context of the time, Japan's strategic objective remained the attainment of dominance over East Asia, even aiming for its conquest. For a potential hegemonic nation, this objective was feasible. The strategic objectives set by Japan during this period were still appropriate.

3.3.2. The "Marco Polo Bridge Incident": The Abandoned "Ishiwara Vision"

While Japan had formulated the correct strategic objectives, the strategic rhythm it set at the time was perceived as overly aggressive. Once a nation enters a state of war, its reserves of comprehensive capabilities [14] begin to deplete due to the exorbitant costs of warfare. When the disparity in specific disparities in comprehensive capabilities between nations is minimal, there's a risk of getting entangled in a prolonged conflict. Such an extended conflict can exhaust a nation's reserves of comprehensive capabilities. Therefore, if the disparity in specific disparities in comprehensive capabilities between two nations

is minimal, the side with the relative advantage must cautiously set its strategic rhythm. This would allow them to enhance their comprehensive capabilities edge, aiming to shorten the duration of the war once it commences.

At this juncture, Japan held a certain edge in comprehensive capabilities over China. However, given China's population size, territorial expanse, and industrial development at that time, this advantage wasn't as substantial as perceived by some factions within Japan's decision-making apparatus, especially the military. Essentially, certain segments of Japan's decision-makers, particularly those in the military, overestimated Japan's comprehensive capabilities edge. In 1931, Japan's militaristic factions initiated the "Manchurian Incident," swiftly occupying the entire Northeast. By 1937, they commenced the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident," launching a full-scale war against China.

In reality, due to Zhang Xueliang and his Northeast Army's non-resistance during the "Manchurian Incident," and considering it was a unilateral action by Japan's militaristic factions without the Japanese government's permission, the two nations hadn't officially entered a state of total war until Japan occupied Northeast China. [15] For Japan, this presented a golden opportunity to expand its comprehensive capabilities advantage and potentially shorten future conflict durations. Major General Ishiwara Kanji, a key figure behind the "Manchurian Incident," proposed an "Ishiwara Vision." This vision suggested that Japan should slow its expansionary rhythm after occupying the Northeast, focusing on its development for 10 to 20 years, if not longer. Given the Northeast's vastness and the resistance it posed, fully integrating it would require considerable time. The "Ishiwara Vision" aimed to capitalize on this by strategically managing Japan's rhythm.

However, for various reasons, the radical factions within Japan's military, led by Tojo Hideki, dismissed the "Ishiwara Vision" and sidelined Ishiwara Kanji. Instead, they launched a full-scale war against China, epitomized by their slogan, "Defeat China in Three Months."

As elucidated, Japan's comprehensive capabilities edge over China wasn't significant and was further diminished due to the high costs of maintaining occupation. Launching a full-scale war against China within five years of occupying Northeast China was overly aggressive. Clearly, compared to Japan's ultimately adopted strategic rhythm, the "Ishiwara Vision" presented a more appropriate tempo.

Historical facts validate this analysis. After pivotal battles like Shanghai, Taiyuan, and Wuhan, Japan inevitably found itself in a protracted conflict against the vast sea of "people's war." [16] The extended duration and high costs began to erode Japan's reserves of comprehensive capabilities, distancing it from its strategic objective of regional hegemony. Furthermore, as analyzed by Chairman Mao Zedong, the lower war costs for agrarian nations compared to industrial ones suggested that, in a prolonged conflict, industrial nations might not necessarily emerge victorious. In essence, Japan's overly aggressive strategic rhythm hindered its objectives of regional dominance, let alone achieving hegemonic status.

3.4. Overambitious Objectives: Misalignment Between Late-stage Strategic Objectives and Overall Comprehensive Capabilities Position in Japan's Later Rise Period

3.4.1. Strategic Objectives in the Late Stage of Japan's Later Rise Period

By 1941, Japan had gained control over a significant portion of East Asia. While the ongoing conflict in China continuously eroded Japan's reserves of comprehensive capabilities, the intensive mobilizations had nonetheless enhanced its overall strength. In terms of the overall comprehensive capabilities position, Japan was a classic potential rising power. As such, the strategic objectives for a potential rising power should prioritize achieving hegemonic capabilities and establishing regional dominance, especially in the absence of intervention from hegemonic powers. The objective of attaining a hegemonic order should merely be seen as a long-term aspiration.

However, at this juncture, Japan, despite not having achieved hegemonic capabilities and with its reserves of comprehensive capabilities continuously being drained, perceived itself as a contender for hegemony. In doing so, Japan set an overly ambitious strategic objective of acquiring a hegemonic order status.

3.4.2. "Attack on Pearl Harbor": The Overlooked "Yamamoto Warning"

Marked by the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan began its challenge against the hegemonic powers with an ambition to secure a hegemonic order status. This miscalculated objective largely stemmed from the decision-making echelon's flawed perception of its overall comprehensive capabilities position. Specifically, the misjudgment of Japan's core decision-maker at the time, Hideki Tojo, regarding the country's overall capabilities became evident in his debates with Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto over the decision to engage the United States in warfare. When Tojo gave the order to Yamamoto to plan the attack on Pearl Harbor, Yamamoto's response was stark: "Have you been to Detroit? Have you seen the number of vehicles Detroit produces daily? If Japan goes to war with the U.S., we won't last more than six months." Tojo dismissively replied, "It's enough." [17] During a decision-making meeting, Yamamoto also commented, "I agree with Mr. Tsuji's views. Those advocating for war with the U.S. perhaps don't understand America's strength. The U.S.'s production capabilities are exceptionally strong, and their naval personnel are agile. As a military man, I would go to war with the U.S. at His Majesty's command, but even with our utmost efforts, we might only last half a year." [18] Within Japan's decision-making circles, Yamamoto stood out as one of the few with a realistic understanding of Japan's overall capabilities.

How did other members of the Japanese military view such sobering insights? After the meeting, Tsuji inquired about the

individual who had spoken earlier. He was told, "That's the traitor who suggests surrendering to the Americans, Admiral Yamamoto." [18] This indicates how absurd the understanding within Japan's core decision-making echelons had become regarding its overall comprehensive capabilities.

Moreover, in the later stages of its rise, Japan not only set misguided strategic objectives but also demonstrated an overly aggressive strategic rhythm in its specific arrangements and military deployment against the U.S. For instance, the Japanese Navy often displayed a speculative tendency, frequently engaging the U.S. fleet without adequate preparation, harboring illusions of decisively defeating the entire U.S. naval fleet.

However, setting strategic objectives is at the heart of strategy. If objectives mismatch with the actual comprehensive capabilities, whether choosing a protracted war or a quick resolution, the outcome remains the same—failure. The only variance lies in the speed at which reserves of comprehensive capabilities are depleted and the onset of that failure. Due to space constraints, a detailed discussion is not further elaborated here.

4. Conclusion: Safeguarding the Rising Process Through "Dual Alignment"

The formulation of strategic objectives and the setting of strategic rhythms are pivotal during the process of national ascent. This article posits that the dynamics of power relations can be categorized into two aspects: the overall position of comprehensive capabilities and the specific disparities in comprehensive capabilities. It is believed here that the primary determinant influencing a nation's strategic objective formulation is its perception of its overall comprehensive capabilities position, while the primary factor influencing a nation's strategic rhythm setting is its understanding of the specific disparities in its comprehensive capabilities.

In its ascent, Japan initially set an overly aggressive strategic rhythm, leading its comprehensive capabilities into a state of sustained depletion. Subsequently, it established overly ambitious strategic objectives, thus falling into the perilous "dual misalignment" state where both the strategic objectives and strategic rhythm were misaligned with its actual capabilities. The grandeur of the strategic objectives predetermined the failure of the overarching strategy, while the rapidity of the strategic rhythm hastened the advent of this unfavorable outcome.

The decision-making echelons of a rising nation can only ensure a smoother realization of their strategic objectives and shield the ascent process from setbacks and interruptions by formulating strategic objectives aligned with their comprehensive capabilities and setting a rhythm congruent with these objectives.

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- [2] Yang Yuan & Sun Xuefeng. (2010). Legitimization Strategies of Rising Powers and Balancing Evasion. *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, 23(3), 1-31.
- [3] Hegemonic nations possess the strongest comprehensive capabilities, with aspiring hegemonic nations typically reaching 80% of a hegemon's comprehensive capabilities. Potential aspiring hegemonic nations usually achieve about 50% of a hegemon's comprehensive capabilities, while non-aspiring hegemonic nations generally have capabilities equivalent to only 30% or even less of a hegemon's strength.
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- [10] Xu Jin. (2022). Strategic Objectives and the Rising Process. *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, 28(4), 6.
- [11] Zhou Piqi. (2009). *Strategic Analysis*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House. This article argues that such a definition remains overly simplistic. The term "objective conditions" encompasses a broad spectrum; the query remains: to which aspects and conditions does it specifically refer?
- [12] While Zhou Piqi's strategic environment concept encompasses the domestic environment, within the context of reforms or transformations, this article posits that the domestic environment essentially denotes the balance of power between reformists and conservatives.
- [13] Li Julian, Gu Yunshen, Yu Weimin (Eds.). (2015). *Encyclopedia Dictionary of World War II (Revised Edition)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House.
- [14] The term "reserve comprehensive capabilities" hypothesizes a nation's comprehensive capabilities when all its resources are converted. Typically, a nation's comprehensive capabilities represent only a fraction of its resources. When these capabilities diminish, a nation can still leverage remaining resources to restore or even elevate its comprehensive capabilities. However, as resources are consumed in this process, the reserve comprehensive capabilities decrease. If resources are excessively depleted, and if comprehensive capabilities are compromised again, the nation might struggle to restore them to their original levels, facing the risks of failure or collapse.
- [15] In reality, the Kuomintang government at that time remained hopeful, anticipating international mediation led by the League of Nations' investigation team to regain sovereignty over the Northeast region.
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