

*Maritime History Case Study Guide:
Northeast Asia Thirteenth Century*

**Mongol Invasions of Northeast Asia
Korea and Japan**

Study Guide

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Study Guide Contents

Decision Point Questions:

The following six “Decision Point Questions” (DPQs) span the Mongol actions from 1270 through 1286 in a continuum. Case 1, the initial decision to invade, and Case 6, regarding a hypothetical third invasion, are both big strategic questions. The other DPQs chronologically in between are more operational and tactical, providing a strong DPQ mix for consideration.

Case 1 The Mongol decision whether or not to invade Japan (1270)

Case 2 Decision to abandon Hakata Bay (1274)

Case 3 Song capabilities enhance Mongol capacity at sea (1279)

Case 4 Mongol intelligence collection and analysis (1275–1280)

Case 5 Rendezvous of the Mongol fleets in Imari Bay (1281)

Case 6 Possibility of a Third Mongol Invasion (1283–1286)

Case 1: The Mongol decision whether or not to invade Japan (1270)

Overview:

The Mongols during the thirteenth century built a nearly unstoppable war machine that delivered almost the whole of the Eurasian super continent into their hands by the 1270s. These conquests brought them the treasures of Muscovy, Baghdad, and even that greatest prize of all: China. Genghis Khan secured northern China under the Jin early on, but it took the innovations of his grandson Kublai Khan to finally break the stubborn grip of the Southern Song, which they only achieved after a series of riverine campaigns during the 1270s. At the same time, Korea also offered fierce resistance to the Mongols, after it was invaded in 1231. A Korean palace in exile held out for decades against the Mongols from Ganghwa Island in the Yellow Sea.

Even as the campaigns against the Song and the Koreans were on-going, Kublai Khan already had his eye on Japan. He likely knew that the Chinese Navy under the Tang had decisively defeated the Japanese at Baek River six centuries earlier (663), enabling full Chinese control over the Korean Peninsula for an extended period. When a faction of Koreans finally joined the Mongol cause, loyalists to the Korean crown fled to distant Jeju Island, in the direction of the Japanese Archipelago. In 1266, Kublai Khan sent a letter to the Kamakura *bakufu* feudal government. That letter was ambiguous, speaking of the possibility of friendly relations without resort to arms, but also stating that the Mongols were the “masters of the universe.” The Japanese initiated preparations for defense of their islands and fatefully chose not to answer the Khan’s letters. Meanwhile, the Mongol leader was gaining confidence that his horsemen could capably handle boats as they waged war on the Southern Song. He looked forward to a day when he controlled the wealth and maritime capacities of both Korean and Chinese coastal civilizations. At this point in history, the year 1270, a decision point arises: was the Mongol attack on Japan inevitable?

Questions:

1. Why did Kublai Khan ultimately opt to invade Japan? Did he fully appreciate the relevant geography and the associated risks to his empire? Did Japan pose an inherent threat to the Mongols given their extensive history of involvement in Korea?
2. Why did the Japanese leaders not reply to Kublai Khan’s entreaties? Were there possibilities for Japan to live in peace with the Mongol Empire or would that have been a naïve disaster leading to Japan’s subjugation under the Mongol yoke? Put another way, if Japan was, at least in part, saved from conquest by a fortunate turn in the weather, would it not have been wiser to negotiate earlier with Kublai Khan?
3. In retrospect, it seems clear that the Mongol Empire was put at risk with the multiple invasions of Japan. Those defeats squandered immense resources that could have been put to other productive uses, including consolidation of previous Mongol conquests. Was it an inherent aspect of the Mongol regime to seek endless conquest? Was the secret of Mongol military success –brutal, yet innovative and self-confident aggression -- also ultimately the cause of their rapid decline? Would a more judicious Khan have realized the limits of Mongol power and the necessity to husband the empire’s resources?

Case 2: Decision to abandon Hakata Bay (1274)

Overview:

Taking place over the course of six decades, the Mongol conquest of China resulted in a proclamation by Kublai Khan of the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty in 1271. Although the Southern Song continued to fiercely resist in some areas of southern China until 1279, the conquests of the Mongols in mainland China added immense power and prestige to the Mongol Empire, which had already brushed up against the great capitals of Europe several decades earlier. Known mainly for their mastery of horse-mounted warfare across the expansive Eurasian steppe, they successfully learned and applied riverine warfare techniques against the Southern Song. Even as he continued to fight in South China, Kublai Khan sent envoys to the Japanese archipelago demanding vassalage.

The envoys were beheaded, and the Mongols subsequently prepared for an invasion. Drawing upon the considerable maritime skills of their Korean and Chinese subjects, the Mongols launched a seaborne invasion in 1274. After crossing the strait of Tsushima, the Mongols subdued the islands of Tsushima and Iki after hard-fought battles. Landing at Hakata Bay in November 1274, the Mongols defeated a coalition of Japanese forces at the First Battle of Hakata Bay. In this battle the Mongols notably used their technological advantage to defeat their adversaries. After the battle, the Mongols pressed forward to Dazaifu, Kyushu's provincial capital. However, concerned about dwindling supplies and a multiplying Japanese force, the Mongols hastily retreated back to their ships. Harassed by storms, the Mongols sailed back to the mainland.

Questions:

1. How did the Mongols draw upon their Chinese and Korean subjects to launch the first invasion of Japan? What factors led to the first Mongol invasion of Japan?
2. How did Mongol successes in the beginning of the campaign affect their decision to retreat? In what ways did the Japanese respond to the first Mongol Invasion? Imagining yourself as a Mongol officer in the invasion fleet, what better preparation could have enabled success of the invasion?
3. If you were a Japanese leader in this period receiving Mongol envoys, would you have considered vassalage before the fearsome invaders? What should the Mongol commander have done after defeating Japanese forces at the First Battle of Hakata Bay? After seizing Dazaifu in 1274, what were some actions open to Mongol leadership?

Case 3: Song capabilities enhance Mongol capacity at sea (1279)

Overview:

The Mongols conquered the Eurasian super continent using skills of horsemanship. In contrast, conquering Japan required skills of seamanship, knowledge, and techniques for handling ships at sea. During the first invasion of Japan in 1274, the Mongols relied on their marriage of convenience with the Koreans who had successfully resisted them for thirty years. Koreans supplied 900 ships, 7,000 ship handlers, and some of the 30,000 combatants for the first invasion, a possible reconnaissance mission that quickly returned, or were forced to return, from their Hakata Bay landing. Clearly, the Mongols felt that they needed an overwhelming force in order to be successful in Japan. The 1279 Mongol victory at sea over the Song at Yamen gave them an alternative to the arduous path of carefully building their own navy. Instead the Mongols co-opted Song ships, ship-building prowess, and seamanship skills by pressing the Song navy into Mongol service. Although effective on the surface, the relationship was imperfect from the point view of unified action. Both Song and Koreans were ambivalent about their Mongol masters.

By the time of the second attempted Mongol invasion of Japan in 1281, the Song were able to supply the Mongol Southern Division fleet with 4,000 ships, 65,000 sailors, many of the 100,000 combatants, and enough rice to sustain an invasion without relying on Japanese foodstuffs. The Koreans contributed about one-quarter of these numbers for the Eastern Division fleet, exactly what they had contributed to the first invasion in 1274. Thus, it was the Song who contributed the ‘overwhelming force’ the Mongols perceived as necessary to conquer Japan. However, inefficiencies in Mongol decision-making and friction in alliances led to delays that proved to be disastrous. Despite the Mongol numbers being adequate for success, based on Song contributions, other factors prevailed that led to failure, including inability to directly control their destiny in the maritime environment.

Questions:

1. Why were the Mongols serially defeated at sea subsequent to their successive victories on land? Under what conditions can a successful land power become a successful sea power? Does the Mongol failure at sea provide useful lessons to other land powers looking to take to the sea with the goal of expansion? If so, what lessons can you identify?
2. Was the Mongol relationship with the Song and the Koreans an alliance relationship? How might the Mongols have improved their ability to successfully incorporate Song and Korean maritime capability into their attempted invasions of Japan?
3. Do you think that the 1279 Mongol victory at sea over the Song made Kublai Khan over-confident? If you were Kublai, what would you have done in 1279 after the victory over the Song? Would you have moved to push the Song into producing such a massive navy within two years to sail to Japan in 1281, taking advantage of momentum, a Mongol strength on land? Or would you take another path? If so, what other path? Give reasons for your decision.

Case 4: Mongol intelligence collection and analysis between invasions (1275–1280)

Overview:

Stung by the defeat of their initial foray against Japan, the Mongols worked hard over seven years so that a truly vast second invasion could take place in 1281. Naturally, the main pillar of preparations for this second attempt would be a complete and objective “lessons learned” from the first attempt. No doubt the Mongol leadership had learned in the course of the initial drubbing something about Japan’s maritime geography, its stalwart samurai and their formidable castles, as well as the challenges related to transporting and supplying an army with the requisite amounts of food, fresh water, and weaponry.

Since the second invasion followed immediately upon the final Mongol victory over the Song navy in 1279, one might surmise that Kublai Khan was once again brimming with confidence. He apparently ignored the advice of several of his senior councilors, who recommended against a second invasion. The main conclusion of the Mongol leadership seems to have been that the first invasion was simply too small, reflecting an evident intelligence conclusion that Japan’s defenders were both more numerous, skillfully led, and better equipped than previously thought. Therefore, the second invasion was comprised of two large divisions, making for a total force about five times that of the first invasion and reaching a total of 200,000 troops in over 4,000 vessels. The second invasion fatefully followed the footsteps of the first invasion quite closely – jumping off from Tsushima Island and then using Iki Island as the forward base. Yet, the Mongols acted on bad intelligence from Japanese prisoners on Tsushima. They thought that Hakata Bay was poorly defended, but that information proved to be disastrously wrong as the Japanese had actually constructed a two-meter sea wall that made this area all but impregnable, forcing the Mongols south to Imari Bay. Practically the entire Mongol invasion force was then destroyed by a storm, the legendary *kamikaze*.

Questions:

1. What intelligence precautions or alternative course(s) of action might a Mongol commander have taken that might have improved chances of success during the second invasion? Why did the Mongols follow an identical attack plan (Tsushima – Iki – Hakata Bay) in 1281?
2. What particular data do maritime commanders need to have and understand that are less important to land commanders? The Mongol commanders had neither access to satellite photos, nor accurate maps, nor tidal charts. What were their best sources of intelligence on Japanese defenses?
3. Climatic and geographical conditions have often proven decisive in military campaigns throughout history. How do military organizations prepare for erratic and unexpected weather conditions? Were the Mongols simply unlucky?

Case 5: Rendezvous of the Mongol fleets in Imari Bay (1281)

Overview:

During July, 1281 the Mongol Eastern Division fleet based in Korea's Hapoo Bay (now Masan Bay) failed to rendezvous with the massive Southern Division fleet from eastern China, four times its size, at either Hapoo Bay or at Iki Island north of Kyushu. Meeting delays were largely due to successful asymmetrical resistance by smaller Japanese ships mounting samurai boarding parties on the larger Mongol ships. As weeks passed, storm danger grew. Little thought appears to have been given by the Mongols to August-September being the peak of typhoon season in Japan. There is no indication that the Mongol fleet sought to identify the protection of a 'hurricane hole' somewhere along the north shore of Kyushu between Hirado and Imari Bay.

The Mongol Southern Division fleet in Hirado and the Eastern Division fleet in Iki Island finally decided to meet in Imari Bay to attack the northern shore of Kyushu that was not defended by high walls similar to those that had deflected the Eastern Division attempt to take Hakata Bay two months earlier. As Mongol ships arrived in Imari Bay, a typhoon swept in from the southwest on August 16, 1281. Violent *kamikaze* drove eighty percent of the Mongol fleet against the rocky south shore of Takashima Island. Despite having had a problem with less severe storms during their first invasion of Japan in 1274, the Mongols did not anticipate their fleet being destroyed by storms, nor did they have effective contingency plans for such an event.

Questions:

1. Do you think the Mongol invasion mission to Japan in 1281 failed primarily due to effective Japanese resistance, Mongol incompetence, Mongol bad luck, or to the *kamikaze* typhoon? Give your reasons.
2. If the Mongol commander of the Southern Division fleet had not died, resulting in the delayed departure with the replacement commander, Fan Wenhui, do you think arrival of the Southern Division fleet in time to reinforce the Eastern fleet at Hakata Bay during June, 1281, might have resulted in a different outcome in Hakata Bay? Why or why not?
3. Given the delays, would you have supported Fan Wenhui's decision to sail with the Mongol Southern Division fleet from Hirado to Imari Bay in mid-August, 1281, in order to attack the shore of Kyushu without defensive walls in place? Why or why not? What course of action might you have taken at that time?

Case 6: Possibility of a Third Mongol Invasion (1283–1286)

Overview:

Despite all of the losses that the Mongols had suffered throughout both invasions, Kublai Khan nevertheless persisted in his belief that the Mongols could mount a successful invasion of Japan. Although he was to turn his attention elsewhere, and then died in 1294, the Mongols never forgot their Japanese adversaries. In fact, a third invasion was actually planned for 1283, but was delayed due to Mongol military operations in southeast Asia. Once again in 1286, an invasion was starting to be arranged. However, a decisive loss against Annam in 1285 led to the delay of that plan. Thus, although a third invasion force was never assembled, the Mongol leadership steadfastly believed that they had the capability and even the necessity to assault Japan once again. Kublai Khan even fretted that Japan might be so brazen as to attack the mainland. The Mongols lost thousands of ships and hundreds of thousands of men in the first two invasion attempts. It must be remembered, however, that Mongol domains stretched across all of Eurasia from Korea to Crimea, and, therefore, the khans had truly unparalleled resources at their disposal.

Questions:

1. To what extent do you think that Kublai Khan's subsequent actions were influenced by the major humiliation of defeat by the Japanese during the prior two invasion attempts? If you were a Mongol commander, which components of invasion planning would you focus on? Would you attempt another invasion of Kyushu, or perhaps invade further north or even east?
2. On the one hand, could the Japanese have somehow been tricked by the Mongols, as regards to the true target of the invasion? Such a ruse worked well on D-day. On the other hand, how could the Japanese have prepared an even more stalwart defense?
3. If you were Kublai Khan, what would you have done after the failure of the Second Invasion? Would you recommend another invasion? Why or why not?