What Lessons Can We Learn from Japan's Rush to the Pacific War?

July 4, 2023, 13:10~14:50

Room 713, Building 19, Waseda University

In the mid-1930s, Japan withdrew from a naval arms control regime that had restrained military buildup on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. This decision and the stunningly rapid reversal of Japan's foreign policy, from international cooperation to unilateral military expansion, are puzzling. Why did the Japanese government decide to pursue unfettered naval expansion? What explains this flagrant overbalancing against the United States?

The talk will investigate the phenomenon of overbalancing, and thereby illustrate Japan's rush to the Pacific War, based on a neoclassical realist model that combines the literatures on threat perception and civil-military relations. It posits that non-democratic countries evolving in a tense international environment have the highest propensity to overbalance and that countries where the military institution possesses high political influence tend to pursue unilateral and coercive foreign policies. These lessons from the Japanese case have major implications for understanding current dynamics revolving around countries such as China, North Korea and Russia.

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He is the author of *Japan's Rush to the Pacific War: The Institutional Roots of Overbalancing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)