

Into the Tiger's Den: Japan and the Tripartite Pact, 1940

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the birth of the Axis alliance between Japan, Germany, and Italy. Most scholarship correctly suggests that the Tripartite Pact was aimed at the United States of America. But existing scholarship largely neglects what is a surprising undercurrent in the diplomatic history of the Axis pact: the extent to which fears of German designs influenced Japanese leaders to join the Axis powers. As Germany gained ascendancy over much of Europe, many within Japan's foreign policy establishment began to fear that Berlin would seek to control French and Dutch colonies in East Asia.

This fear persuaded Japanese leaders to extend their new order to 'Greater East Asia' as a precondition to forging an alliance with Germany. In broadening the scope of its sphere of interest to 'Greater' East Asia, Japanese leaders sought to deny Germany a hegemonic position in Japan's backyard, and sought to make Japanese preeminence in East and Southeast Asia the precondition for creating any Berlin–Rome–Tokyo axis.

Keywords

Axis, Germany, Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Japan, Second World War, Tripartite Pact

The Tripartite Pact, which was signed to great fanfare in Berlin on 27 September 1940, shook the foundations of global politics. Unsurprisingly, both US Ambassador to Japan Joseph C. Grew and Japanese Ambassador to Great Britain Shigemitsu Mamoru could not contain their shock and dismay. Grew had believed that war with Japan could be avoided until Japan signed the Axis alliance. 'I saw the constructive work of eight years swept away,' Grew bemoaned to a fellow Foreign Service officer in February 1941, 'as if by a typhoon,

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earthquake, and tidal wave combined.’¹ Japanese Ambassador Shigemitsu, too, thought the decision to join the alliance ‘passed human understanding.’ He wrote after the war, ‘But I felt that the alliance placed Japan in an international position from which it could not be saved, and I could not express the depths of despair into which I plunged.’² This dismay was understandable. The Tripartite Pact constituted a major turning point in foreign policy, and hinted at a further estrangement between Japan and the United States of America. It alerted US public opinion to a looming catastrophe in the Pacific and created the atmosphere in which US President Franklin D. Roosevelt aligned more closely with the British.³ And it provided the context in which Japan seized an expanded empire in Southeast Asia by force of arms. Moves that would have been impossible without the Tripartite Pact ultimately embroiled Japan in an all-out war in the Asia-Pacific, a war Japan had little chance of winning.

Despite its importance in the road to Pearl Harbor, the diplomatic history surrounding the Tripartite Pact, especially Japanese intentions for the pact, remains under-studied. The most convincing scholarship rightly views the Tripartite Pact as Japan’s ‘trump card’ against the United States of America. In joining the pact, Japanese leaders sought to scare the USA away from a confrontation that might lead to a two-ocean war.⁴ Japan’s blustering and explosive Foreign Minister, Matsuoka Yōsuke, further envisioned expanding the Tripartite Pact to include the Soviet Union, thus completing a revisionist bloc opposed to the Anglo-American world order.⁵ He even made a trip to Europe in March–April 1941 in an attempt to create this new bloc. These moves, Matsuoka felt, would enable Japan to advance into the resource-rich territories of Southeast Asia without provoking war with the USA. Other lines of reasoning maintain that the alliance was intended to counter the growing Soviet threat in East Asia, or to help Japan settle the China Incident, the undeclared Sino–Japanese war that had been raging non-stop since 1937.⁶ What existing scholarship largely neglects is a surprising

1 Grew to Franklin Mott Gunther, February 1941. *Joseph C. Grew Papers*, MS AM 1687 v. 111 (24), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

2 Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Shōwa no dōran*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo 1952), 21.

3 J.M. Meskill, *Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan: The Hollow Diplomatic Alliance* (London 2012), 25.

4 In English, see A. Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (Abingdon, 1987), 113; W. LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.–Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York, NY 1998), 193–5; D.J. Lu, *From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor: Japan’s Entry into World War II* (Washington 1961), 106–19; T. Iguchi, *Demystifying Pearl Harbor: A New Perspective from Japan* (Tokyo 2010), 46–8; H. Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor* (Princeton, NJ, 1950), 111. In Japanese, see Hosoya Chihiro, ‘Sangoku dōmei’, *Taiheiyō sensō e no michi*, Vol. 5 (Tokyo 1963), 159–227; Saitō Yoshie, *Azamakareta rekishi: Matsuoka to sangoku dōmei no rimen* (Tokyo 1955); Yoshii Hiroshi, *Nichi-Doku-I sangoku dōmei to Nichi-Bei kankei: Taiheiyō sensō mae kokusai kankei no kenkyū* (Tokyo 1987). See also Hosoya Chihiro, *Ryō taisenkan no Nihon gaikō* (Tokyo 1988), 186.

5 This was most forcibly argued in Saitō, *Azamakareta rekishi*, especially Ch. 5. See also J. Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936–1945*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY 1970), 78–84. More recent scholarship has disputed this commonly held position. See Hattori Satoshi, *Matsuoka gaikō: Nichi-Bei kankei o meguru kokunai yōin to kokusai kankei* (Tokyo 2012).

6 See M.A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, NY 1987), 139–40; 167–8. The navy, he argues, sold their support to the German alliance in return for higher materials allocations. Also see D.J. Lu, ‘From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor:

undercurrent in the diplomatic history of the Axis pact: *fears* of German designs influenced Japanese leaders to join the Axis.

This may appear somewhat puzzling. After all, a cursory reading of the Japanese newspapers, media, or the intellectual discourse of the 1930s shows that public opinion was highly pro-German. The broader Japanese public admired Hitler and saw in him the symbol of a shared resistance to the Anglo–American international order. Moreover, German intellectuals like Karl Haushofer and lesser-known theorist Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld exercised a decisive influence on the thinking of Japan’s reform bureaucrats, the planners of Japan’s wartime empire.⁷ And perhaps most importantly, Japan and Germany shared a virulent anti-communism that led the two rising powers into a diplomatic and political-strategic embrace. Both nations joined together in the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936, which Roosevelt found worrisome enough to issue his famous Quarantine Speech the following year. At first glance, then, the creation of a full-blown Axis alliance in 1940 appears little more than the denouement of a longer process of German–Japanese engagement and cooperation.

Such an interpretation is indeed correct. But there is more to the story. For a brief moment in the summer of 1940, pro-German sympathies were tempered by a strong undercurrent of suspicion and doubt. This article shows the impact that fears of imagined German designs on Asia had on the Japanese decision to join the Tripartite Pact. This is not to say that fears of Germany were the primary driver of politics in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Far from it, the so-called ABCD (American–British–Chinese–Dutch) encirclement was the most important threat scenario discussed among policymakers, and concerns about Soviet intentions were deeply entrenched in the policy mind. Instead, I will show fears that emerged and dissipated in a single historical moment – that of German ascendancy over Europe. In one of history’s little ironies, Japanese distrust of German motives helped bring the Axis alliance to fruition. As Germany gained power over much of Europe, many within Japan’s foreign policy establishment began to fear that Berlin would seek to control French and Dutch colonies in East Asia. These fears, of course, were not based on any broad understanding of German policy. But they existed nonetheless, and persuaded Japanese leaders to extend their new order to ‘Greater East Asia’ as a precondition to forging an alliance with Germany. In the process, Foreign Minister Matsuoka declared Japan’s willingness to enter the

Japan’s Entry into the Second World War’, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University (1960), 200–23; K. Komatsu, *Origins of the Pacific War and the Importance of ‘Magic’* (New York, NY 1999), 100; W.G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism, 1894–1945* (Oxford 1987), 221. Toland, *The Rising Sun*, 1: 81–2. A different line of reasoning looks to longer Japan–German ties. For this line of thought, see N. Tajima, ‘The Berlin–Tokyo Axis Reconsidered: From the Anti-Comintern Pact to the Plot to Assassinate Stalin’, in C.W. Spang and R.-H. Wippich (eds) *Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945: War, Diplomacy, and Public Opinion* (New York, NY 2006), 161–79. And, finally, Mori Shigeki offers a penetrating analysis of the Imperial Japanese Navy’s desire to join the pact. See Mori Shigeki, ‘Sūjiku gaikō oyobi nanshin seisaku to kaigun’, *Rekishigaku kenkyū*, 727 (1999), 1–18, 64.

⁷ See, for instance, J. Mimura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Ithaca, NY 2011).

tiger's den of an alliance with Germany to capture the prize of expanded influence in Southeast Asia.

This foray into the tiger's den of a German alliance also provides hints into another understudied topic in Japanese history: the birth of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It was the broadening of Japanese interests to 'Greater' Asia that led Tokyo to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in August 1940. Scholars have done excellent research on the long-term trajectory that led to the birth of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, and the ways in which Japan's pan-Asian ideology was oriented at building legitimacy in the region.⁸ But focusing on the longer-term trends obscures a shorter-term goal of Japan's new order. The Co-Prosperity Sphere indeed constituted propaganda, but not only toward Asia. The timing of the declaration – at the height of concerns over German motives toward the region – suggests that initially the Co-Prosperity Sphere also constituted propaganda aimed at Berlin. In broadening the scope of its sphere of interest to 'Greater' Asia, Japanese leaders sought to deny Germany a hegemonic position in Japan's backyard, and sought to make Japanese pre-eminence in East and Southeast Asia the precondition for creating any Berlin–Rome–Tokyo axis.

By the late 1930s, expanded German–Japanese political cooperation appeared all but inevitable. Japan and Germany joined in the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936, owing in no small part to the efforts of military attaché to Berlin, Ōshima Hiroshi. To many across the Japanese political establishment, the German–Japanese pact represented more than mere resistance to Soviet communism. Most pundits and elites alike also saw it as a first step toward a shared resistance to the existing Anglo–American-led world order. The Anti-Comintern Pact appeared to herald the birth of a Berlin–Tokyo axis and to initiate a new era of partnership between the two powers.

But the honeymoon was short-lived. Despite the existence of pro-Axis voices across the political establishment, and despite the fact that many saw Japan as creating a new world order with Germany, Japanese leaders sought to avoid any action that would risk antagonizing the USA, Great Britain, and France. Accordingly, since early 1939 Japan dragged its feet in negotiations for an all-embracing military pact with Germany and Italy. Foreign Minister Arita Hachirō, in particular, maintained a wary attitude toward Berlin, and advanced a 'middle-of-the-road diplomacy' (*chūdō gaikō*) that refused to involve Japan too

8 It is difficult to provide a comprehensive list. Some representative works include E. Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War, 1931–1945* (New York, NY 2007); C. Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, NY 2007); and Matsu'ura Masataka, '*Dai tōa sensō wa naze okitanoka: pan-Ajia shugi no seijikeizashi*' (Tokyo 2010). Other notable works on Japan's revolt from the West include Abe Hirozumi, "'Dai tōa kyōeiken' kōsō no keisei', *Kitakyūshū daigaku hōsei ronshū*, 16, 2 (1989), 121–46; P. Duus, 'Imperialism without Colonies: The Vision of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 7, 1 (1996), 54–72; P. Duus, 'The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere: Dream and Reality', *Journal of Northeast Asian History*, 5, 1 (2008), 143–54; Eizawa Kōji, '*Dai tōa kyōeiken no shisō*' (Tokyo 1995); and Kobayashi Hideo, '*Dai tōa kyōeiken no keisei to hōkai*', (2nd edn., Tokyo 2006).

deeply with Europe's rising powers.⁹ In this Arita found support from both Prime Minister Hiranuma Kiichirō and Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa. The only alliance that these Japanese leaders were willing to sign was one directed solely against the Soviet Union – they remained unwilling to join in a pact against Great Britain and France as well. This attitude continually frustrated Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, who from March 1939 noted his skepticism 'about the possibility of an effective collaboration between the phlegmatic and slow Japanese and the dynamic Fascists and Nazis.'¹⁰ Japan's seemingly endless hesitation led Hitler and Mussolini to seek an alternative solution: they abandoned the notion of cooperation with Tokyo and established a bilateral alliance, the Pact of Steel, in May 1939.

Japanese policymakers soon worried about the ramifications of their foot dragging, and sensed that their desire to avoid antagonizing the Western democracies was leading to a growing estrangement with Berlin. This perceived estrangement began on 23 August 1939, when Hitler broke with the Anti-Comintern Pact against the Soviet Union and signed the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact. Japanese leaders had been warned that this might happen. Yet the move still shocked Tokyo. Hitler, after all, signed the pact while Soviet Corps Commander Georgy Zhukov's tanks overran Japanese positions at Nomonhan on the border of Mongolia and Manchuria. Grand Chamberlain Hata Shunroku thus recorded the German–Soviet pact in his diary as a 'bolt from the blue', and Konoe Fumimaro would later label it one of the two German betrayals that would undermine the Axis alliance.¹¹ The Hiranuma Cabinet saw Berlin's move as a 'breach of faith'.¹² Prime Minister Hiranuma Kiichirō publicly decried the situation in Europe as 'baffling', and promptly resigned.¹³

This growing distrust only increased as the German blitzkrieg began. An internal Foreign Ministry document completed in late April 1940, as the Third Reich expanded into Norway and Denmark, noted the nonaggression pact as a sign that Germany no longer sought to bind its fate to that of Japan. Strikingly, the report worried that Tokyo 'can no longer hope for German sympathy with our New Order in East Asia', and recommended a policy of cooperation to prevent estrangement with Berlin. The report concluded:

9 See Gaimushō, *Gaimaushō no hyakunen*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo 1969), 435–6; and Harada Kumao, *Saionji-kō to seikyoku*, Vol. 7 (Tokyo 1952), 258–9.

10 G. Ciano, *Ciano's Diary, 1939–1943* (London 1947), 8 March entry: 41. Negotiations with Germany and Italy to form a united front against England, France, and the Soviet Union began in earnest in January 1939. See Bōeichō Bōei Kenshōjo Senshishitsu, *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo 1967), 582–3.

11 *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, 1: 607; and Konoe Fumimaro *Ushinawareshi seiji: Konoe Fumimaro kō no shuki* (Tokyo 1946), 41.

12 Hattori Takushirō, *Dai tōa sensō zenshi* (Tokyo 1965), 13.

13 Konoe Fumimaro, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 29. See also Gaimushō, *Gaimaushō no hyakunen*, 2: 433; *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, 1: 607; Bōeichō Bōei Kenshōjo Senshishitsu, *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo 1968), 1.

But considering that Germany and also Italy stand in the same position [with us] as countries establishing a new world order, we shall continue moderate cooperation and friendly relations, and in particular will refrain from pursuing measures that give the impression of estrangement among Japan, Germany, and Italy'.¹⁴

A May 1940 Foreign Ministry policy document demonstrates a similar concern. 'If German antagonism toward Japan strengthens', the document argued, 'do not be caught off guard and do not allow Germany to take policy that spurs the Soviet Union to attempt to restrain Japan.'¹⁵

Germany's lightning-fast successes only intensified this anxiety. The war soon spread to the Low Countries and France, with the *Wehrmacht* seizing victory wherever it went. By 25 June 1940, Germany controlled much of Western Europe, and many in Japan judged that it was only a matter of time before Britain fell as well.¹⁶ Germany's sudden ascent brought into sharp focus fears not only of a possible estrangement, but also of the fate of Dutch and French colonies in Asia. Berlin, after all, could seek to exercise control over both French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies – the very core of Japan's envisioned empire in East Asia. Thus from mid-May 1940, after the defeat of the Netherlands, the Yonai Cabinet began seeking assurances that Germany would respect the status quo in the Netherlands East Indies. From late June, after the fall of France, they sought similar guarantees toward French Indochina.¹⁷ Much to Tokyo's chagrin, Berlin remained largely silent concerning Southeast Asia, except for German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop's 20 May 1940 renunciation of German claims on the Netherlands Indies.¹⁸ Ribbentrop had carried this through against the fierce opposition of his ministry, and the Foreign Ministry in Berlin never officially reaffirmed the Third Reich's intentions to stay out of the region.

But Japanese diplomats kept seeking reassurance. Special Ambassador to Italy Satō Naotake cabled Tokyo and noted that at his 8 July talks in Berlin, Ribbentrop 'took an evasive attitude toward Japan's colonial demands.'¹⁹ Ambassador to

14 'Teikoku taigai hōshin' 27 April 1940. *Ajia rekishi shiryō sentā*, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records [Henceforth JACAR], Reference code: B02030544500. Also see *Shina jihen kankei ikken* Vol. 15, File A.1.0.0 30, Japan Foreign Ministry Archives [Henceforth JFMA.]

15 Taken from 'Dainiji taigai shisaku hōshin yōkō', May 1940. JACAR, Reference code: B02030012300. Also see *Teikoku no taigai seisaku kankei ikken*, File A.1.0.0. 6. JFMA.

16 See, for instance, Satō Kenryō, *Dai tōa sensō kaisōroku* (Tokyo 1966), 94.

17 Arita gave his first request to Ambassador Ott on 11 May 1940. See Telegram, Ott to the Foreign Ministry, 11 May 1940. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, Series D, Vol. 9, Document 234, 327 [Henceforth DGFP]. Ambassador Kuruu followed up in Berlin. For an account of the meeting, see State Secretary Weizsäcker Memorandum, 17 May 1940, DGFP, Series D, Vol. 9, Document 262, 360–2. Japanese initiatives concerning French colonial possessions began in late June, when Kuruu met Weizsäcker on 21 June 1940. DGFP, Series D, Vol. 9, Document 511, 642–3.

18 Ribbentrop stated, 'This German–Dutch conflict was an exclusively European affair and had nothing to do with overseas questions. Germany, therefore, had no interest in occupying herself with such overseas problems.' 20 May, DGFP, Series D, Vol. 9, Document 280, Telegram Foreign Minister to the Embassy in Japan, 386.

19 Horinouchi Kensuke, *Nihon gaikōshi*, 21: *Nichi-Doku-I dōmei, Ni-So chūritsu jōyaku* (Tokyo 1971), 232. Henceforth *Nihon gaikōshi*, 21.

Germany Kurusu Saburō also questioned his German counterparts from mid-May, but did not find them forthcoming. On 10 July, Kurusu sent a telegram to Foreign Minister Arita lamenting his lack of success. ‘Germany’, the telegram reads:

does not seem to have a clear attitude regarding [the fate of] the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina. We cannot secure a definite promise or a pledge – it is very regrettable that Germany seems to be trying to avoid giving a promise on these issues.²⁰

But why were Japanese leaders so fixated on Southeast Asia? Germany’s extraordinary successes generated fears that Japan was missing a rare opportunity to advance south. Expansion into Southeast Asia was partly viewed as an end unto itself. Expansionist aims had increased in size and scope from the end of the First World War, with pan-Asianists like Ōkawa Shūmei drawing attention to the moral imperative of Japan’s regional leadership.²¹ From the mid-1930s, leaders in the navy had begun to call for a ‘southern advance’ – in part to separate its goals from the army (which remained fixated on a hypothetical ‘northern advance’ against the Soviet Union) and to justify higher allotments from the Japanese budget. But German successes in Europe in mid-1940 shifted army eyes to Southeast Asia as well. Mid-level staff officers – the very people who made policy for the Imperial Japanese Army – saw a window of opportunity to strike at British colonies in Southeast Asia. As Britain teetered on the brink of collapse, they began to believe that a strategic ‘southern advance’ into Malaya and Singapore would give Japan a voice in the postwar disposition of Britain’s Asian colonies.²² It was at this point that the phrase ‘don’t miss the bus!’ became popular among the government and populace alike, with many believing there was a window of opportunity to advance Japan’s regional interests. Accordingly, from early June, the Imperial Headquarters sent military planners and spies to the Philippines, Malay, French Indochina, Thailand, Sumatra, Java, and New Guinea to start planning for military operations against Southeast Asia (a rather ironic measure, as two months earlier the military had planned to start withdrawing troops from China in 1941).²³ And on 22 June, Army Ministry Military Affairs Bureau Chief Iwakuro Hideo astounded the Army General Staff by calling for an immediate surprise attack on Singapore.²⁴

20 Telegram: Ambassador Kurusu to Foreign Minister Arita, 10 July 1940. In Ōkubo Tatumasa, et al., *Kaigunshō shiryō* 10, Document 1168: Shōwa Shakai Keizai Shiryō Shūsei [Henceforth SSKSS] Vol. 10 (Tokyo 1985), 170. This is also quoted in Kawanishi Kōsuke’s excellent study on the Foreign Ministry. Kawanishi Kōsuke, ‘Gaimushō “dai tōa kyōeiken” kōsō no keisei katei’, *Rekishigaku kenkyū*, 798 (2005), 8.

21 For more on pan-Asianism and Ōkawa Shūmei, see Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*, and C. Aydin, ‘Japan’s Pan-Asianism and the Legitimacy of Imperial World Order, 1931–1945’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 12 March 2008, available at: http://www.japanfocus.org/site/make_pdf/2695 (accessed 18 March 2015).

22 Hatano Sumio, “‘Nanshin’ e no senkai: 1940-nen”, *Ajia Keizai*, 26, 5 (May 1985), 25–6, 31–48.

23 Tanemura Suketaka, *Daihon’ei kimitsu nissshi* (Tokyo 1985), 10 May 1940 entry: 33–4.

24 *Ibid.*, 22 June 1940 entry: 35.

Expansion into Southeast Asia also had a practical side as well – it went hand in glove with resolving the China quagmire, Japan's costly and troublesome war in China. Advancing into Southeast Asia, army leaders believed, would cut off the British and French aid that was helping to keep afloat the Chiang Kai-shek regime, leaving Chiang no hope but to surrender. And seizing leadership over Southeast Asia would ensure access to natural resources for Japan's war effort in China. Of course, such expansion did not necessitate the use of military force. Accordingly, policy documents generally highlighted the necessity of using diplomatic measures to procure natural resources from the Netherlands Indies and to create sympathy across the region for Japan's war aims.

Thus by mid-1940 – when Hitler's Empire stood ascendant in Europe – Japanese leaders (particularly those in the army and the Foreign Ministry) had begun to see expanding into Southeast Asia as an imperative to solve the China Incident and to create Japan's new order. And the foreign policy establishment worried that Germany's seizure of Holland and France meant that Hitler could seek political control over Dutch and French colonies in Asia. Although Ribbentrop in May 1940 promised that Germany would not intervene in Southeast Asian affairs, he never repeated this promise, even after continued questioning from Japanese diplomats. This, of course, did not imply a German desire to control French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies. But it heightened Japanese concerns.

The Foreign Ministry's Eurasian Affairs Bureau took these concerns to heart. Satō's cable of his 8 July talks with Ribbentrop convinced Section Chief Andō Yoshirō and others in the Eurasian Affairs Bureau that Germany intended to seize French and Dutch colonies in Asia. As a countermeasure, Andō produced a draft plan for strengthened relations with the Axis powers. Andō's plan claimed that Germany would soon defeat Britain and achieve hegemony over Europe and Africa. It was only a matter of time before Berlin turned its eyes to Southeast Asia. Japan thus had a window of opportunity to force Germany to recognize Japanese leadership over the region. To this end, Andō was willing to forge 'the highest level partnership, short of entering the war.'²⁵ By July 1940, mid-level bureaucrats in the Foreign Ministry were willing to ally with Germany to ensure Japanese pre-eminence in Asia.

Discussions of Andō's draft plan, which took place at a mid-level bureaucratic meeting on 16 July, confirmed that such fears reached across the foreign policy establishment. Present at the meeting were three section chiefs from the Foreign Ministry's Eurasian Affairs Bureau, one Foreign Ministry secretary, and representatives from the Army Ministry General Staff Office and the Navy Ministry.²⁶ An excerpt of the conversation reveals shared understandings between Army

25 Gaimushō, *Gaimushō no hyakunen*, 2: 438–9.

26 The participants included: (1) Foreign Ministry Eurasian Affairs Bureau Section 1 Chief Andō Yoshirō; (2) Foreign Ministry Eurasian Affairs Bureau Section 3 Chief Ishizawa Yutaka; (3) Army Ministry Lt. Col. Takayama Hikoichi; (4) Foreign Ministry Eurasian Affairs Bureau Section Chief Tajiri Akiyoshi; (5) Foreign Ministry Secretary Tokunaga; (6) Army General Staff Office representative Major Tanemura Sakō; and (7) Navy Ministry representative Commander Shiba Katsuo.

General Staff and Foreign Ministry officials of possible German designs on the region.

Andō Yoshirō (Foreign Ministry Eurasian Affairs Bureau, Section 1 Chief): The greatest difficulty with strengthening relations [with Germany and Italy] is as follows. Ambassador Satō's telegrams give off the vague sense that Germany will seize the reins of power in the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina, and only aims to provide Japan with economic benefits. Namely, it seems that Germany will not recognize Japanese political leadership [over the region].

Lt. Col. Takayama Hikoichi (Army Ministry): I also think so. To the extent possible, we need to act forcefully to make Germany recognize [Japanese] leadership over French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies.

Andō: . . . Looking at the telegrams sent the other day by Consul General Yamaji, it seems that Germany plans to offer the territory to the east of the Netherlands East Indies to Japan. Stated differently, this means that Germany plans on taking Java and Sumatra.

Takayama: Regarding the future of the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina, the attitude Germany takes toward Japan greatly depends on the attitude Germany plans to take toward the Soviet Union in the postwar era. For Germany, the postwar era is not far off. So if Germany plans to deal harshly with the Soviet Union, then it might unexpectedly entrust us with French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. But if they immediately commence with the creation of the new order in Europe, then the French Indochina and Netherlands East Indies issue might become quite problematic. However, for now Japan should consider that Germany intends to take over French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, and must take measures to deal with this. We need to be thoroughly prepared for this.

Andō: I agree. We should fiercely oppose German efforts to take political leadership over the region.

Ishizawa Yutaka (Foreign Ministry Eurasian Affairs Bureau, Section 3 Chief): I also agree.²⁷

Strikingly, these fears extended beyond the Foreign Ministry to mid-level officers in the Imperial Japanese Army. Lt. Col. Takayama was not alone in worrying about Germany; others, too, had an increasing sense that 'if Japan is not careful then the Netherlands Indies will also fall into Hitler's hands.'²⁸ No doubt owing to these

²⁷ See 'Nichi-Doku-I teikei kyōka ni kan suru riku-kai-gai sannshō keikan kyōgikai', JACAR, Reference Code: B04013489500. Also see *Nichi-Doku-I dōmei jōyaku kankei ikken*, File B.1.0.0. J/X3, JFMA. I was led to this quotation through Kawanishi, 'Gaimushō', 13.

²⁸ Cited in Hatano, "'Nanshin' e no senkai", 39.

fears, the meeting pushed through Andō's draft plan of partnering with Germany with only minor revisions.

These concerns even reached the ears of Shigemitsu Mamoru, then Japan's ambassador to Great Britain. 'Many on the Japanese side', Shigemitsu recalled in his memoirs, 'were seized with panic about what would happen to British colonies in Asia, and feared what would become of the Japanese Empire once Dutch and French colonies were occupied by Germany.' If Germany gained political control over the European colonies in Asia, they feared, then Japan would be far worse off than before the war. So wrapped up were their minds around Germany's ultimate victory that most 'would not lend an ear to dissenting opinions'. They could have no peace of mind without an immediate alliance with Germany, an alliance that agreed on spheres of influence after the war. Japanese leaders, Shigemitsu realized, worried that Japan might 'miss the bus'.²⁹

Japan's Foreign Ministry experts were scared of a phantasm. No evidence or intelligence showed German intentions to claim the Southeast Asian colonies. Surprisingly, the Eurasian Affairs Bureau remained almost wholly reliant on predictions of German successes in Europe and meetings with top German officials. The Nazi regime seemed destined to defeat Britain and gain hegemony in Europe and Africa. Berlin's evasive and tight-lipped attitude was taken as proof that the Nazi regime had designs on Asia. This intelligence failure no doubt had much to do with longer-term changes. In the wake of the Manchurian Incident of 1931, the Foreign Ministry underwent radical personnel and structural changes that undermined the diplomatic establishment's ability and prestige.³⁰ Moreover, this was also an inter-ministerial intelligence failure. Had those in the Foreign Ministry engaged in discussions with the army, they might have learned of German Ambassador Eugen Ott's 24 June 1940 statement to Lt. General Mutō Akira and General Koiso Kuniaki, which reaffirmed Germany's statement of disinterest in the Netherlands Indies (and French Indochina).³¹ At the very point when broader intelligence could have painted a clearer picture, Japan found itself in the dark, worrying over phantom German aims.

These phantom concerns reached the highest levels of Japan's policy elite, and began to impact policy after the collapse of the Yonai Cabinet in mid-July. Konoe Fumimaro replaced Prime Minister Yonai Mitsumasa, and formed his second cabinet on 22 July 1940. Two days later, Konoe held a Four-Minister Conference on national policy, attended by Konoe, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke, Army Minister Tōjō Hideki, and Navy Minister Yoshida Zengo. They reaffirmed that Southeast Asia lay within Japan's 'living space' (*seikatsuken*), which would eventually reach as far as India, Burma, Australia, and New Zealand. But initially, Japan would focus on incorporating China, Manchukuo, French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, and the 'South Seas'. And the ministers asserted the necessity of

29 Shigemitsu, *Shōwa no dōran*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo 1952), 277–8.

30 B.J. Brooks, *Japan's Imperial Diplomacy: Consuls, Treaty Ports, and War in China, 1895–1938* (Honolulu, HI 2000).

31 Ott to the Foreign Ministry, 24 June 1940. DGFP, Series D, Vol. 10, Document No. 273, 5.

Germany and Italy ‘consenting to Japan’s political leadership over and cooperation with the region.’³² Later that day, a draft letter of orders to Ambassador to Germany Kurusu Saburō reaffirmed the necessity of keeping Germany from infringing upon Japan’s sphere or exercising indirect control over French or Dutch colonies. The letter included concerns over German policy toward Southeast Asia:

It is possible that Germany intends to use France and Holland to place in their own hands political leadership over French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, and will only provide limited economic rights to Japan. But these areas are indispensable for the Empire’s construction of its new order, and the Empire absolutely needs to obtain political control over the region. Accordingly, if Germany’s attitude is [such to control French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies], be prepared for considerable friction with Germany, and be resolved to make the Empire’s aims come to pass.³³

The new Kono Cabinet immediately codified its desire to expand south. A Liaison Conference on 22 June 1940 adopted a policy document, ‘Outline for Dealing with the World Situation’, which noted the two imperatives of ending the China Incident and expanding into Southeast Asia.³⁴ Strikingly, the ‘Outline’ noted that if the chance arose, Japan was ‘to seize advantageous conditions and take military action’ to advance south.³⁵ Four days later, the Cabinet adopted ‘The Main Principles of Japan’s Basic National Policy’, which declared that Japan would construct a ‘New Order in Greater East Asia’ centered on Japan, China, and Manchukuo.³⁶ This was the first official policy document noting the term ‘Greater East Asia’, with ‘Greater’ implying *Nanyō* (the South Seas) and *Nanpō* (the Southern Areas), Japanese terms for modern-day Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Indian subcontinent.

Thus the southern advance became national policy at precisely the moment when the future of Japanese rule over Southeast Asia looked uncertain to members of Japan’s ruling elite. The brilliant but explosive Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke took to the radio waves on 1 August 1940 to explain this new national policy. ‘The essence of our country’s foreign policy’, Matsuoka argued, ‘must focus on the establishment of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that centers on Japan, Manchukuo, and China.’ This notion of a Co-Prosperity Sphere – a

32 *Kaigunshō shiryō* 10, SSKSS, 10: Document 1193, 257.

33 *Kaigunshō shiryō* 10, SSKSS, 10: Document 1196, 263; Kawanishi, ‘Gaimushō’, 14.

34 For the ‘Outline’, see ‘Sekai jōsei no suii ni tomonau jikyoku shori yōkō’, in Sugiyama Hajime, *Sugiyama memo: Daihon’ei seifu renraku kaigi tō hikki*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo 1967), 11–12 [Henceforth *Sugiyama memo*]; Gaimushō, *Nihon gaikō nenpyō narabi ni shuyō monjo: 1840–1945*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo 1955), 436–7; and Matsumoto Shun’ichi and Andō Yoshirō (eds) *Nihon gaikōshi* Vol. 22: *Nanshin mondai* (Tokyo 1973), 186–90.

35 *Sugiyama memo*, 1: 12; Gaimushō, *Nihon gaikō nenpyō*, 2: 437.

36 For ‘The Main Principles’, see ‘Kihon kokusaku yōkō’, in *Sugiyama memo*, 1: 7–10; and in Nihon Keizai Renmeikai, *Kihon kokusaku yōkō* (Tokyo 1941).

regional political bloc of Asian nations led by Japan – would replace Japan's New Order in East Asia as the fundamental vision for the future. In this context it fit firmly into a long-standing Pan-Asian discourse, and rejected the political settlements that emerged in the wake of the First World War. This long-term trajectory toward the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere has been well noted by scholars.³⁷ But the timing of the declaration and the language used also suggests that this Co-Prosperity Sphere slogan might have also had a short-term aim: recognition from Germany of Japan's preeminent position in Southeast Asia. After all, Matsuoka made abundantly clear the position Southeast Asia held in Japan's foreign policy designs. 'It goes without saying', Matsuoka declared, 'that the South Seas are also included in the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'. Moreover, Matsuoka stressed that Japan would be willing to cooperate with any country 'that understands the new state of affairs in East Asia and voluntarily pushes forward in the creation of a new world'.³⁸ In making this statement, was Matsuoka not also declaring Japan's sphere of interest in Southeast Asia to potential allies like Germany?

There is good reason to believe that Matsuoka in part oriented his Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere speech toward Germany. After all, in the summer of 1940, Matsuoka was no doubt as wary of German motives as other members of the foreign policy elite. This may appear surprising, for Matsuoka in 1937 had seen a partnership with Germany as natural and inevitable. 'In signing the [Anti-Comintern] Pact', he wrote, 'there is no path for us Japanese to walk but to hold hands with Germany and press forward boldly'.³⁹ But both direct and circumstantial evidence points to Matsuoka's growing distrust of Germany. If we are to believe Matsuoka's personal aide, Saitō Yoshie, Matsuoka had felt wary of Germany since his childhood days, and even after becoming foreign minister he still professed, 'There are no less trustworthy people than the Germans.'⁴⁰ This point is of critical import. After all, from the moment Matsuoka took office in July 1940, he began to reformulate the Kasumigaseki bureaucracy, dismissing many former ambassadors and ministers and filling key positions in the with zealous supporters of his leadership and the Axis alliance. In the process, Matsuoka recalled no fewer than 39 diplomats from posts abroad. Though professional diplomats like Shigemitsu saw him as destroying Japan's diplomatic establishment in a 'bloodbath', Matsuoka merely ensured a Foreign Ministry supportive of his foreign policymaking.⁴¹ Matsuoka is critical to understanding the Tripartite Pact. After all,

37 Good recent works on the topic include Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War*; Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*; Kobayashi, 'Dai tōa kyōeiken' no keisei to hōkai; and Matsu'ura 'Dai tōa sensō' wa naze okitanoka.

38 *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* (2 August 1940, evening edition), 1. Matsuoka Yōsuke's address is also reprinted in *Shūhō*, 199 (7 August 1943), 2–3.

39 Matsuoka Yōsuke, *Nichi-Doku bōkyō kyōtei no igi* (Tokyo 1937), 78–9.

40 Saitō, *Azamukareta rekishi*, 27. See chapters 2 and 3 for his mistrust of Germany.

41 Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Shigemitsu Mamoru shuki* (Tokyo 1986), 132. The military also spoke of Matsuoka's 'leave diplomacy to me attitude.' See Bōeicho Bōei Kenshūjo Senshishitsu, *Daihon'ei*

it was Matsuoka, more than anyone else in the Japanese government, who from July 1940 pushed for the alliance with Germany and Italy.⁴²

On 1 August, the same day he announced the Co-Prosperity Sphere, Matsuoka invited German Ambassador Eugen Ott to his home in Sendagaya, where they drank tea and discussed (among other things) the fate of Southeast Asia. ‘Japan’, Matsuoka argued:

is currently trying to establish a New Order in East Asia – with Japan, Manchuria, and China as its core – that also includes the South Seas. We aim to liberate and free the Sphere’s peoples and ethnicities, and plan co-existence and co-prosperity where all peoples and ethnicities jointly prosper.⁴³

But with Germany newly ascendant in France and the Low Countries, Matsuoka worried about Berlin’s Southeast Asia policy. He questioned Ott on Germany’s attitude toward the South Seas. Ott, however, gave a non-committal answer, and refused to take any position on Greater East Asia until Japan presented a concrete plan outlining the advantages to Germany.⁴⁴ In fact, most of Ott’s replies conveyed to Matsuoka a sense of apathy toward improved relations. Ott even noted his personal dissatisfaction with what he considered Tokyo’s insulting treatment, and complained that Satō Naotake was sent to Rome and Berlin as part of an effort ‘to estrange Japan from Germany and Italy’. As later accounts show, Germany’s cold reception ‘no doubt gave Matsuoka a feeling of inner unease’.⁴⁵

Such questioning highlights the anxiety with imagined German expansion in Asia. Matsuoka did all he could to avoid drawing ire from Berlin. When Ott asked Matsuoka what he meant by the ‘South Seas’, Matsuoka left vague the extent of Japan’s new order. Instead, he merely gave the cautious reply that it includes Thailand, but may be expanded in the future. But this ran counter to the consensus held among the Konoe Cabinet that French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies were to form the core of Japan’s new regional order. And it even contradicts Matsuoka’s own views and statements. He asserted at a 2 August press conference, ‘It is obvious that French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies are included in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’.⁴⁶ Ott thus found Matsuoka’s assertion rather odd. In a 29 August meeting with Japan’s

rikugunbu dai tōa sensō kaisen keii, Vol. 3 (Tokyo 1973–4), 219. Henceforth *Kaisen keii*, 3. See also Gunjishi Gakkai, *Kimitsu sensō nisshi*.

42 Tanemura, *Daihon’ei kimitsu nisshi*, 29 September 1940 entry, 52.

43 Bōeicho Bōei Kenshūjo Senshishitsu, *Daihon’ei rikugunbu dai tōa sensō kaisen keii*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo 1973–4), 181. Henceforth *Kaisen keii*, 2.

44 Ott to the Foreign Ministry, 7 August 1940. DGFP, Series D, Vol. 10, Document No. 273, 394.

45 *Nihon gaikōshi*, 21: 242; Gaimushō, *Gaimushō no hyakunen*, 2: 441. Ott cabled Ribbentrop, ‘I left the Foreign Minister in no doubt that Japan had much to make up for in order even to bring about a state of really benevolent neutrality toward Germany.’ Ott to the Foreign Ministry, 7 August 1940. DGFP, Series D, Vol. 10, Document No. 273, 395.

46 *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun* (2 August 1940, evening edition), 1.

former ambassador to Berlin, Lt. General Ōshima Hiroshi, Ott noted his confusion. ‘Foreign Minister Matsuoka’, Ott observed, ‘stated that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere region only goes as far as Thailand; it is strange that it does not include the Netherlands East Indies’.⁴⁷ It seems logical, then, to conclude that Matsuoka deliberately obscured the scope of Japan’s regional designs to avoid antagonizing the nation with whom Japan sought to create a new world order. Matsuoka himself hinted at this on 27 August, when he told Ōshima, ‘Germany will take a great loss from Japan’s advance into the South Seas’.⁴⁸ This lack of forthright communication epitomized the tensions and mistrust that would be endemic to the Axis partnership.

Despite this distrust, Matsuoka vocally pushed for a closer working relationship with Germany. On 23 July 1940, the day after taking office, Matsuoka called on the Eurasian Affairs Bureau to discuss Section Chief Andō’s draft plan for the Axis alliance. Matsuoka refused to accept Andō’s draft plan, which called for ‘the highest level partnership, short of entering the war’. ‘This is no good’, he told Andō, stressing that Japan would never win an alliance with Germany without being prepared to risk war. Matsuoka even wrote the proverb ‘One cannot capture a tiger cub without venturing into the tiger’s den’ into the page margin of Andō’s draft plan.⁴⁹ The German alliance, in short, was too important to miss out on. Matsuoka was willing to venture into the tiger’s den of a stronger alliance with Germany to capture the prize of expanded influence in Southeast Asia.

On 30 July, Matsuoka’s close aide drafted a new plan, ‘On Strengthening Cooperation among Japan, Germany, and Italy’, which reflected Matsuoka’s hopes for the alliance. Approved by the foreign, army, and navy ministries on 6 August after only minor revisions, this plan reflected shared policy aims within the Japanese government, and it became the cornerstone of the Konoe Cabinet’s efforts to join the Axis. The new plan called not only for stronger cooperation but also for a basic understanding of each nation’s respective interests. This included the respect for each power’s sphere of influence: Germany and Italy would have their ‘living space (*seikatsuken*) that includes Europe and Africa’, and Japan would control ‘East Asia, including the South Seas’.⁵⁰ The policy paper also called on each nation to deepen economic and political partnership, to maintain peaceful relations with the Soviet Union, and to cooperate (to a limited extent) in their

47 *Kaisen keii*, 2: 195.

48 *Ibid.*, 195.

49 *Nihon gaikōshi*, 21: 240. Gaimushō, *Gaimushō no hyakunen*, 2: 440. As Hosoya Chihiro explains, this was Matsuoka’s favorite phrase. See Hosoya, ‘Sangoku dōmei’, 181. A more colloquial translation would be ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’

50 ‘Nichi-Doku-I teikei kyōka ni kan suru ken’, in *Kaisen keii*, 2: 185–90. For the likelihood of it becoming the cornerstone of the Konoe administration, see *Kaisen keii*, 2: 191.

respective wars. Notably, it also emphasized the scope of Japan's 'living space' (*seizonken*) during negotiations with Germany and Italy.⁵¹

In negotiations with Germany and Italy, we should consider the following as the living space for the creation of the Empire's New Order in East Asia: Japan, Manchukuo, and China as its core, the old German mandate islands, French Indochina and its islands in the Pacific, English Malay and Borneo, the Netherlands East Indies, Burma, Australia, New Zealand, and India.⁵²

By late August, German leaders were ready to press forward with an alliance. This willingness had its roots in the changing war situation in Europe. The difficulties the *Luftwaffe* faced in achieving air superiority over Britain convinced Berlin to delay indefinitely Operation Sea Lion, the planned invasion of Britain. Sensing a protracted war on the horizon and worrying that the USA would join the war in support of Britain, Germany increasingly viewed Japan as a potential ally. Japan would serve as the cork to bottle up American might; US power would be effectively neutralized if war against Germany also meant risking war in the Asia-Pacific. Ribbentrop indicated Berlin's now-favorable view toward Japan in a 23 August cable to Ambassador Kurusu, and revealed that Germany would send Special Envoy Heinrich Georg Stahmer to negotiate the pact.

Meanwhile, Japanese initiatives for the alliance proceeded apace. A Four-Minister Conference on 6 September affirmed the goals of the August policy paper. The ministers foresaw the world as splitting up into four blocs – East Asia, the Soviet Union, Europe, and the United States of America. To ensure the nation's ability to create its East Asian order, the four ministers agreed with the recommendation to negotiate an alliance with Germany and Italy.⁵³ They started the process through a series of talks beginning on 9–10 September with Stahmer, mostly at Matsuoka's home in Sendagaya. Stahmer stated in plain language Germany's designs: the alliance with Japan would help restrain the USA from intervening in Europe. Stahmer spoke of the necessity for a 'strong, determined, and clear attitude' from the Axis powers, one that would serve as a 'powerful and effective threat' against the United States of America.⁵⁴ In return, Stahmer made clear Germany's intention to 'accept and respect Japan as political leader of Greater East Asia'.⁵⁵ Japan had finally received the assurance it sought.

In the wake of the Stahmer talks, Matsuoka sold the idea of allying with Germany at a 14 September 1940 Four-Minister Conference and a

51 Readers might note my decision to translate *seikatsuken* and *seizonken* as 'living space.' Both reflected German ideas of Lebensraum, or living space. And both were used interchangeably in governmental documents.

52 *Kaisen keii*, 2: 187.

53 *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, 2: 109–11. By this time, Navy Minister Yoshida Zengo, who had been against the Tripartite Pact, took sick and was admitted to a hospital.

54 Gaimushō, *Nihon gaikō nenpyō*, 2: 444.

55 *Sugiyama memo*, 1: 39; *Daihon'ei rikugunbu*, 2: 111–12; and Gaimushō, *Nihon gaikō nenpyō*, 2: 443–4, 452–3.

Liaison Conference. One of the tactics he chose stressed the freedom Japan would gain to enact its designs on Southeast Asia. Matsuoka stated, 'Shall we immediately sign an alliance with Germany and Italy, or shall we turn down the Axis and stand alongside England and America? We have reached a point where Japan must make a decisive decision.' Matsuoka continued, considering worst-case scenarios. He wondered aloud what would happen if Tokyo continued to treat discussions for an Axis pact in an ambiguous manner. This could have drastic ramifications.

If Germany defeats Great Britain,' Matsuoka argued, 'in the worst case scenario Germany might form a European union and reach a compromise with the United States... the worst case scenario where Germany would not allow Japan to have a hand in British, Dutch, and European [Southeast Asian] colonies.

On the other hand, things did not look any better should Japan tilt toward the USA. Doing so, he argued, would force Japan to 'give up on our dreams for a New Order in East Asia, and spend at least a half century bowing our heads to Britain and America.' 'In other words,' Matsuoka concluded, 'we cannot even consider an alliance with America. The only path left to us is an alliance with Germany and Italy.'⁵⁶

The 19 September Imperial Conference and 26 September Privy Council discussions further committed Japan to the Tripartite Pact, after some revisions from the continuing discussions with Berlin. Much of the deliberations focused on the Axis pact as a military alliance directed against the USA.⁵⁷ Matsuoka himself argued that the alliance with Germany would help prevent a Japanese-US clash in the Pacific.⁵⁸ But strikingly, an undercurrent of doubt penetrated the Privy Council discussions. Ishii Kikujiro, a Japanese diplomat who had been Foreign Minister during the First World War era, voiced strong misgivings with the proposed pact. Hitler, Ishii argued, would prove a dangerous ally. The German leader, he recognized, had publicly spoken of alliances as little more than temporary expedients. Further, Ishii argued that Hitler would work to prevent Japan from emerging as a great power. Germany under Hitler was thus no friend to Japan. In fact, Germany throughout its modern era brings about disaster or misfortune to its allies. 'Bismark once said', Ishii thundered, 'that in international alliances one horseman and one donkey are required, and that Germany must always be the horseman.' For all his skepticism, Ishii still supported the proposed alliance, but he warned that Japan must take great care in any dealings with Berlin.⁵⁹

The following day, on 27 September 1940, Japanese Ambassador Kurusu, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, and Italian Foreign Minister Ciano signed the Tripartite Pact in Berlin to great fanfare. The Tripartite Pact provided

56 *Sugiyama memo*, 1: 35; Gaimushō, *Nihon gaikō nenpyō*, 2: 445-6.

57 See *Kaisen keii*, 2: 223-64.

58 See *Ibid.*, 252.

59 Taken from *Kaisen keii*, 2: 258-9. Ishii is also mentioned in R.J.C. Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of War* (Stanford, CA 1961), 180-1.

the basic working relationship between the three nations for the rest of the war. Japan agreed to recognize the leadership of Germany and Italy in Europe. In turn, Germany and Italy would respect Japanese control of Greater East Asia. All member-nations agreed to support each other if attacked by a power (outside of the Soviet Union) not currently involved in the wars in Europe and East Asia. Thus the Axis Powers were born.

But Matsuoka weakened the pact on the very day of its signing through a secret understanding with Ambassador Ott. This secret understanding – produced through a flurry of letters between the two diplomats – stressed that, in the event of an attack by a third power, the signatories would declare war *only after* consultation and after agreeing that an ‘attack’ had actually taken place. This altered the Tripartite Pact in an important way: it gave Japan an escape route from its *automatic* treaty obligations to come to Germany’s military aid. Ott confirmed this fact in a letter to Matsuoka. ‘Needless to say,’ he wrote, ‘the question, whether an attack within the meaning of article 3 of the Pact has taken place, must be determined through the joint consultation of the three contracting parties’.⁶⁰ The inclusion of this secret release owed to pressure from the Imperial Japanese Navy – it was the condition upon which they assented to the pact. Moreover, the secret understanding highlights the high-handedness of German diplomats in Tokyo; Ott entered into the agreement without Foreign Minister Ribbentrop’s authorization or knowledge.⁶¹ Thus Ott conferred upon Japan a significant diplomatic advantage, effectively creating a lopsided alliance almost wholly in Japan’s favor. The amended alliance both confirmed Japanese leadership over Southeast Asia and provided a one-sided guarantee of military aid to Japan.

Still, not all in Tokyo agreed with the decision to bind their fate with Berlin and Rome. The navy had fiercely disagreed with signing the Tripartite Pact since 1939. According to former Naval General Staff member and Rear Admiral Hoshina Zenshirō, Navy Minister Yoshida publicly argued that ‘England and America are, like us, oceanic countries, and Japan’s level of economic dependence is very high. I am against the Tripartite Pact, which would turn both of these countries into enemies.’⁶² Yoshida had opposed the pact with such passion and ferocity that he collapsed and entered the hospital on 3 September 1940. Yoshida’s collapse provided the context by which the navy could assent to the German alliance. Yoshida was replaced as Navy Minister by the agreeable-looking but weak-willed and indecisive Admiral Oikawa Kōshirō. It was Oikawa’s subordinate,

60 Ott to Matsuoka, 27 September 1940, DGFP, Series D, Vol. 11, Document No. 119, 205–6. For the Japanese records of the exchange, see *Nichi-Doku-I dōmei jōyaku kankei ikken*, Vol. 1, File B.1.0.0 – 057, JFMA; JACAR Reference Code: B04013489700.

61 Hosoya, ‘Sangoku dōmei’, 202–4; and Meskill, *Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan*, 20.

62 He held this attitude while a minister in the Abe Cabinet, August 1939 to January 1940. Hoshina Zenshirō, *Dai tōa sensō hisshi: ushinawareta wahei kōsaku: Hoshina Zenshirō kaisōroku* (Tokyo 1975), 15. Yoshida Zengo confirms his own antipathy to the Tripartite Pact, Yoshida Zengo, *Moto kaigun taishō Yoshida Zengo dan shūroku*, in File 25, *Yoshida Zengo kankei monjo*, National Diet Library (NDL). Konoe Fumimaro also notes the Navy’s traditional antipathy to the Tripartite Pact. See Konoe, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 36–7.

Navy Vice-Minister Toyoda Teijirō, who played the leading role in overturning his service's traditional resistance to the alliance with Germany. Toyoda committed the navy to the alliance for two reasons. First, he viewed it as in the national interest only after hearing of the favorable secret understanding Matsuoka signed with Ott.⁶³ Upon learning of Ott's promise, Toyoda concluded that 'the reason for the navy's opposition [to an alliance with Germany] was completely canceled.'⁶⁴ Second, as Michael Barnhart and Mori Shigeki have argued, Yoshida's successors also assented to the alliance to obtain for the navy higher materials allocations and a primary role in Japan's advance to the south.⁶⁵

Although navy resistance crumbled, many other elite groups or highly placed individuals held firm to their opposition to the alliance. Many members of the influential Shōwa Kenkyūkai opposed the pact. Cabinet Information Board Head Itō Nobufumi also decried the idea of working closely with Germany. He argued that the alliance would have a harmful economic impact, inhibiting Japan from attaining the self-sufficiency needed to fight future wars. Further, he just did not trust Germany. 'When push comes to shove,' he argued, 'you don't know what Germany will do. Consequently, we ought not rely even a little on other countries.'⁶⁶ And Tamura Kōsaku, a public intellectual who would later become deeply involved with the navy's brain trust, decried the Japanese drift toward Germany in an article of 15 September 1940 in *The Diplomatic Review (Gaikō jihō)*. Japan, he insisted, 'must not engage in such disgraceful behavior as openly inviting Germany to intervene in Asia.'⁶⁷

With such widespread distrust of Berlin, why did Japan become a willing party to the Tripartite Pact? The most convincing existing scholarship, as noted in the introduction, views the Axis alliance as aimed at the United States of America. Konoe himself stated, 'one big aim of signing the Tripartite Pact was the prevention of the U.S. entry into the war'.⁶⁸ Matsuoka, too, made a similar argument. At the 19 September Imperial Conference and again at the 26 September Privy Council discussions, he argued that the German alliance was instrumental 'to avoid war' with the USA in the short term and to reconcile with Washington in the longer term.⁶⁹ It should be clear, however, that this represents only one side of

63 Hosoya, 'Sangoku dōmei', 202–4.

64 Quoted in P. Mauch, 'Dissembling Diplomatist: Admiral Toyoda Teijirō and the Politics of Japanese Security', in M. Kimura and T. Minohara (eds), *Tumultuous Decade: Empire, Society, and Diplomacy in 1930s Japan* (Toronto 2013), 239.

65 Navy objectives are elaborated in M. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, NY 1988), 162–75; and Mori, 'Sūjiku gaikō', 1–18, 64.

66 Sakai Saburō, *Shōwa Kenkyūkai* (Tokyo 1979), 185–7.

67 Tamura Kōsaku, 'Monroeshugi no shinkaishaku,' *Gaikō jihō*, No. 859 (15 September 1940), 78.

68 Konoe, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 33. The original aim of including the Soviet Union into the Tripartite Pact was a means of maintaining a balance of power with the United States and Great Britain. See Konoe Fumimaro, *Konoe nikki* (Tokyo 1968), 148. See also Konoe Fumimaro, *Konoe Fumimaro shuki: heiva e no doryoku* (Taihoku 1947), 12–13. And Konoe also assumed that strengthened tripartite relations would bring the United States of America to the negotiating table. *Kaisen keii*, 1: 404.

69 *Sugiyama memo*, 1: 49–50. Also see Tanemura, *Daihon'ei kimitsu nisshi*, September 29, 1940 entry, 53.

the story. The existing scholarship tends to overlook *fears* of German motives toward Asia as a reason behind seeking the alliance.

US Ambassador Grew had actually caught wind of these fears in August 1940. ‘There are indications’, he recorded in his diary:

that irritation with Germany is growing in official Japanese circles. Many believe that Germany still wishes Chiang Kai-shek to win and that a German victory in Europe would result in the establishment of German interests in China. Possible German designs on the Netherlands East Indies in such an event are also causing anxiety.

Grew furthermore noted increasing frustrations in Japan with German efforts both to embroil Japan in an anti-Anglo–US alliance. ‘Clearly’, he wrote, ‘the Germans are overplaying their hand’.⁷⁰ Within a few months, however, Grew had changed his tune. ‘But it is painful’, Grew wrote in October 1940, ‘now to see that even as late as August I wrote that the Japanese Government was getting fed up with the Germans in their efforts to embroil Japan with the United States’. A month after his August diary entry, after all, Japan had joined an alliance Grew believed was aimed at ‘getting Japan and the United States into eventual war’.⁷¹ But Grew had been closer to the truth than he realized. Japanese leaders shouldered great fears that Germany would seek to acquire and control French and Dutch colonies in East Asia. Granted, Japanese decision-makers were well aware that Nazi Germany lacked a strong navy necessary to seize those colonies. But even claiming those colonies (and asking for Japanese help in seizing them) would have drastically limited the scope of Japan’s new order. This was anathema to those who saw their nation as the leader of an expanded international order encompassing Southeast Asia. The alliance with Berlin and Rome effectively served to thwart imagined German ambitions in Asia. It is thus best understood as being directed at *both* Germany and the USA.

Strikingly, this context of fear of imagined German motives in Asia – fears that emerged and dissipated in a single historical moment – helps us view in fascinating new light Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Viewed from a longer perspective, the Co-Prosperity Sphere declaration represented the culmination of a pan-Asian vision for Japanese hegemony over East Asia, a vision that had its deepest roots in the breakdown of the Versailles–Washington System in the 1920s. Other scholars have noted that the Co-Prosperity Sphere epitomized a propagandistic means to secure loyalties in the region for Japan’s imperial project or to win over the USA.⁷² But viewing the birth of the Co-Prosperity Sphere

70 See J.C. Grew, *Diary* (July–December 1940), 4493, *Joseph C. Grew Papers*, MS AM 1687 v. 101, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

71 *Ibid.*, 4555–6.

72 See, for instance, Mori Shigeki, ‘Matsuoka gaikō ni okeru tai Bei oyobi tai Ei saku: Nichi-Doku-I dōmei teiketsu zengo no kōsō to tenkai’ *Nihonshi kenkyū*, 421 (1997), 35–62.

through a shorter-term lens leads to a different perspective. The timing of its establishment – in the summer of 1940, at the height of concerns about German motives toward Asia – suggests that the Co-Prosperity Sphere was in equal measure part and parcel of a propaganda campaign aimed at Berlin. Fears that Germany might claim territories essential to Japan's order led Japanese leaders to call for extending their sphere of influence into 'Greater East Asia', and to consider leadership of this expanded area the sine qua non for closer relations with Berlin. This helps explain Matsuoka's statement in his 1 August speech, that Japan would 'take active measures to cooperate' with any nation that understands 'the new state of affairs in East Asia'. The implied target was no doubt Germany, with which the Konoe Cabinet had already decided to forge an alliance. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, then, served in part as propaganda to make Japanese preeminence in Southeast Asia the precondition for signing the Tripartite Pact.

The Berlin foreign policy establishment understood Japanese intentions. On 7 August 1940, Ambassador Kurusu sought to elaborate the Co-Prosperity Sphere idea in a meeting with Foreign Minister Ribbentrop and State Secretary Weizsäcker, of which Weizsäcker left a detailed report. Kurusu maintained that this Co-Prosperity Sphere would include 'Greater East Asia, including the South Pacific, on a broad basis'. Yet it was clear that discussions related primarily to Japanese interests in Southeast Asia, as Kurusu used the Co-Prosperity Sphere announcement to seek Berlin's approval of a Japan-dominated Greater East Asia. 'Kurusu', Weizsäcker wrote:

did not mention the statement of our disinterestedness regarding these overseas problems, which we had made to the Japanese in May of this year, but it was plain to see what he was aiming at, and he was obviously acting upon instructions from Tokyo in this matter.⁷³

And Kurusu would continue to use the notion of 'Greater East Asia' to emphasize Japanese primacy over Southeast Asia. He met with German Foreign Ministry Commercial Policy Bureau Director Emil Wehl on 22 August, and informed Wehl that Germany would henceforth have only economic – not political or military – interests in the Netherlands Indies.⁷⁴ The Co-Prosperity Sphere propaganda was in part a diplomacy of distrust and an attempt to keep Germany out of Japan's own backyard. Only after the Tripartite Pact was signed would Japanese policymakers start to imagine what the Sphere *actually* implied for the region.

The mistrust surrounding the formation of the Axis alliance had longer-standing impacts, and perhaps reveals why the Axis would fail to cooperate throughout the war. Adolf Hitler's megalomania and well-known disdain of Japan certainly served

73 State Secretary (Weizsäcker) Memorandum, 7 August 1940, DGFP, Series D, Vol. 10, Document 304, 432–3.

74 A. Kudō, 'The Reality of Wartime Economic Cooperation: From Germany's Blitzkrieg Victory to its War with the Soviet Union', in A. Kudō, N. Tajima, and E. Pauer (eds) *Japan and Germany: Two Latecomers to the World Stage, 1890–1945*, Volume 2 (Folkestone 2009), 357.

as an important factor. Hitler held all non-Europeans in contempt; he would have rather allied with Great Britain, whose global policies and far-flung empire he admired and respected. In fact, the Japanese humiliation of the British Empire at Singapore in February 1942 appears to have caused Hitler considerable personal distress. Moreover, by March 1942 von Ribbentrop's press bureau spoke in bitter terms over Japanese victories, because they belonged to the 'yellow race' and came 'at the expense of the white race'.⁷⁵ In an amusing twist of fate, Japanese military victories begot the very estrangement Japan had feared in 1939 and 1940.

But the process and structure of the Tripartite Pact played a role as well in the failure of the Axis. The Tripartite Pact was, at its core, an older style of alliance more akin to a non-aggression pact. The pact merely stipulated that participants were to recognize each other's sphere of influence and aid each other if attacked by a third power (excluding the Soviet Union). Most importantly, from Tokyo's perspective, the pact kept Germany out of Japan's East Asian domain. This was hardly a strong foundation from which to build a close-knit alliance or prosecute a global war. The 18 January 1942 'Tripartite Military Pact' between Germany, Italy, and Japan further institutionalized the sphere of influence nature of Axis relations.⁷⁶ The pact simply divided operational areas between the Axis Powers at 70 degrees east longitude, giving Germany and Italy responsibility for the Near East, Middle East, and European Theaters, and Japan control over the Pacific and East Asian Theaters. Even though policymakers like diplomat and Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru would push for greater diplomatic and military cooperation, such efforts always came to naught. As one Finnish representative in Tokyo bitterly complained after the war, 'all the cooperation in the Axis you could put in a small handbag.'⁷⁷ The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere may have been a campaign to oust the West from Asia, but it created an alliance that served Japan poorly during the Pacific War.

Both Konoe and Matsuoka would live to be conscience-stricken over the decision to ally with Germany. With the signing of the Tripartite Pact, Tokyo continued tumbling down the slippery slope to war with the United States of America and Great Britain. Berlin's failure to consult Tokyo over important policies engendered further difficulties. Konoe viewed the German decision to invade the Soviet Union without consulting Japan as Berlin's 'second betrayal', one that contributed to the fall of both empires.⁷⁸ The invasion, Konoe no doubt realized, placed the Soviet Union firmly in the Allied camp and removed any restraints from the full exercise of US and British power in Asia. By this time, Konoe would no doubt have agreed with Italian Foreign Minister Ciano, who complained in his diary that Germans

75 Ciano, *Ciano's Diary, 1939–1943*, 10 March 1942 entry: 444.

76 Ōda Ichirō and Ikeda Chikata (eds), *Nihon gaikōshi*, Vol. 24: *Dai tōa sensō, senji gaikō* (Tokyo 1971), 118–23.

77 L.M. Guerrero, *Ang Buong Ulat Ng Buhay Ni Laurel: Ang Mga Huling Araw Ng Imperyong Hapones: Takip-silim Sa Tokyo* (Manila 1949), 104.

78 Konoe, *Ushinawareshi seiji*, 41–2.

'are possessed by the demon of destruction.'⁷⁹ The irascible Matsuoka, too, would come to regret the pact with the same vigor and emotional power with which he hailed its signing. On 8 December 1941, when Tokyo announced the attack on Pearl Harbor, Matsuoka lamented the pact from his sick bed at his home in Sendagaya. As tears welled up in his eyes, Matsuoka bewailed, 'I am now painfully aware that the signing of the Tripartite Pact was the biggest mistake of my lifetime... When I think of this, it will bother me even after I die.'⁸⁰

Biographical Note

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⁷⁹ Ciano, *Ciano's Diary, 1939–1943*, 11 August 1939 entry: 124.

⁸⁰ Saitō, *Azamukareta rekishi*, 5.