

# CHAPTER 9: CONTENDING WITH ATTEMPTS TO COMMUNIZE CHINA

## 2. SHIDEHARA'S IDEALISTIC DIPLOMACY VS. REALITY

### Ineffective, irresponsible diplomacy

Diplomacy, as exercised by Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijūrō (or Shidehara diplomacy, as it is referred to today), associated with non-intervention in China and international cooperation, tends to be widely described as representative of 1920s pacificism in Japan. Shidehara served two terms as foreign minister, the first lasting from June 1924 to April 1927, and the second from July 1929 to December 1931. Here is how Shidehara himself described the basis of his foreign policy:

Today we may acknowledge that, in general, the hearts and minds of the people of the world are rejecting narrow-minded, exclusionist, and self-serving policies. They are opposed to the abuse of military might. They repudiate aggression, preferring that international problems be resolved through understanding and cooperation among the relevant nations. (...) I am confident that the age of international strife has finally come to an end, and that it shall be superseded by an age of international cooperation. (...) The genuine and permanent interests of a nation can be ensured through equitable harmony between the positions of the relevant nations. Our diplomatic relations with all nations shall be governed by this conviction.<sup>1</sup>

This could be interpreted as confidence in human goodwill and rationalism. When it takes the form of a specific foreign policy involving China, this conviction becomes, “We shall respect China’s rational stance, and at the same time, we shall be prepared to protect our own rational stance. Translation: “We have no intention of interfering in any way whatsoever with Chinese domestic policy.”

About the chaos and disunity pervading China, Shidehara remarked, “The mission of uniting China will not be easily accomplished. Although the results of that undertaking have not been satisfactory, it would be mistaken to conclude immediately that the Chinese national character is not suited to self-government.” Shidehara believed that the Chinese were indeed capable of self-government. About Chinese communism, he said, “There seems to be some speculation in the world about China’s becoming a communist nation, and that the Chinese are planning to abrogate international treaties that they believe are disadvantageous to China. But I place no faith in such conjectures. We must closely watch, always with hope and patience, the efforts of the Chinese people toward political reform. In other words, while asserting our rightful interests in China, we shall give ample, sympathetic consideration to the special situation in China. We shall also endeavor to devise means to foster spiritual, cultural, and economic collaboration and cooperation between Japan and China.”

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<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered at 50<sup>th</sup> session of Japanese Diet on January 22, 1925 in *Gaimushō* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), ed., *Nihon gaikō nenpyō narabi ni shuyō bunsho* (Chronology and important papers on Japanese Diplomacy), vol. 2 (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1965).

Shidehara was dispelling anxiety about the communization of China, and at the same time, rejecting the possibility that China might unilaterally abrogate unequal treaties.

Such optimism! Such magnanimity toward China! But every single one of Shidehara's predictions missed its mark, and his trust in China was completely betrayed.

Shidehara's installation as foreign minister coincided with the enactment of the anti-Japanese immigration law in the US. His comment at the time was, "When all is said and done, we have no choice but to wait for the people of the United States to arrive at a reasonable understanding of our people and our assertions. Neither rash outbursts nor emotionally charged tirades will engender international understanding. I am convinced that the love of justice, the very spirit that resided in the hearts of Americans when the United States was founded, remains within them. It is my hope that the time will come when this fact is proven." In other words, he truly believed that the American love of justice would resolve the problem.

Here we have the fundamental spirit governing Shidehara diplomacy in the foreign minister's own words. It is a profession of faith in what is rational, in what is just, the sort of utterance we would expect from a martyr. At the same time, it is a demonstration of absolute trust in innate human goodness, which offers us a glimpse into Taishō democracy.

When the Nanjing Incident occurred, Shidehara opposed the use of any military force. He clung to that stance, subscribing to a policy of absolute non-interference, which differed from that adopted by the UK, US, and other nations. Shidehara decided that since the communists were scheming to use the Nanjing Incident to foil Chiang's plans and ruin him, "at this time the best policy for the nations involved to adopt is to leave it to the Chinese to maintain public order in China. We should allow the healthy elements of the NRA who, although not without flaws, are at the center of control, an opportunity to stabilize the situation." He believed that Japan, with 2,000 of its citizens, six consulates and branch consulates on the upper reaches of the Yangzi, could not immediately resort to measures as strong as those taken by the British. As far as it goes, his position seems reasonable.

Not long after the incident, John Tilley, British ambassador to Japan, asked Shidehara whether Japan had any intention of providing material assistance to Chiang Kai-shek and his moderate followers. Shidehara replied in the negative, saying that doing so would result in Chiang's being branded a traitor, thus placing him in an even more difficult position. But at that time communist elements in the NRA were engaging in anti-Chiang and anti-foreign activities ordered and supported by the USSR. Consequently Shidehara's reluctance to support Chiang was tantamount to abandoning the fight against communist forces, and meant that his diplomacy was both ineffective and irresponsible. When Tilley pressed Shidehara, asking what he would do if radical communism spread throughout all of China. Shidehara's response was, "I do not believe that communism will permeate all of China. But even if the communists do gain control of China ... we have little to fear. Regardless of the outcome of the Chinese situation, other nations will have no choice but to stand by and wait patiently for whatever form it takes." Such a rosy view of communism! Shidehara was personally opposed to communism, but he comforted himself by theorizing that it must have some favorable aspect, however minuscule. By closing his eyes to the dangers of communism, he thought he was in keeping with the progressive trend of the time. When

I contemplate the how communism in China grew more and more virulent, the error of Shidehara's assumption becomes all too clear.

Shidehara said the use of force would not inflict mortal wounds on China. Rather, the nations using it would suffer in a conflict with China. He also advocated support for Chiang Kai-shek and his moderate followers. Shidehara's theories about China were by no means completely without merit. Unfortunately, he made no effort to connect them to reality, or to put them into practice. I have already mentioned that Shidehara professed great understanding of and sympathy for China in connection with unequal tariffs at the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff in Beijing (1925-26) to the point of neglecting to reach an accord with the other powers. But China repaid Japan with atrocities, i.e., the Nanjing Incident. Shidehara should have had some insight into the chaos and disorder in China, but he did not identify the source of the unrest there: the communist forces. Accordingly, his idealistic peace diplomacy was far removed from reality and, ultimately, his lofty arguments resulted only in inaction and irresponsibility.

Another incident arose that seemed to mock Shidehara's appeasement policy. It unfolded at about 2:00 p.m. on April 3, 1927 in the Japanese concession in Hankou, near the Naniwa Restaurant, a canteen catering to military personnel. Apparently Chinese children threw stones at Japanese sailors on shore leave. When the sailors scolded them, an argument ensued. A mob of Chinese surrounded Japanese sailors inside the Naniwa Restaurant and began assaulting them. A growing crowd of Chinese chased the sailors and destroyed the house where they had sought refuge. Before even 10 minutes had elapsed, the Chinese began attacking Japanese civilians. They vandalized and looted Japanese shops, the Dōjin Hospital, and the Heigan Temple. Vice-consul Tanaka Masakazu, who had rushed to the scene, was assaulted as well. The Japanese concession was now in total chaos.<sup>2</sup>

Witnesses reported that the attacks on the Japanese concession seemed to have been planned in advance by the communist-controlled ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Unions). Several days before the incident erupted, there were signs of Chinese attempting to start trouble in various locations. On April 3 messengers were seen running about, and soon a mob burst into the Japanese concession. Li Lisan and Xiang Zhongfa of the ACFTU were spotted riding around on trucks, directing the violence. There were approximately 2,200 Japanese nationals in Hankou at the time. Out of concern for their lives and safety, a 200-man naval landing party came ashore and eventually fired several dozens of shots, aiming at the ground, which dispersed the crowd. Two people were wounded during the fray. Later the Japanese concession was surrounded by barbed wire and sandbags for protection, and order outside the concession was maintained by Chinese troops. The landing party had swelled to about 500 men by the time the incident ended. All Japanese residents outside the concession were rescued, and the six Japanese sailors detained by the Chinese were released. Subsequently most of the 2,200 Japanese residing in Hankou withdrew to Shanghai or Japan.

Peace was restored within a few days. But given growing anti-Japanese public opinion, Japanese nationals whose presence in Hankou was not essential began departing from Nanjing, Wuhu,

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<sup>2</sup> Usui 1971, *op. cit.*

Jiujiang, Shashi, Chongqing, Chengdu, and other locations on the middle reaches of the Yangzi, bound for Shanghai or Japan.

The safety of Japanese residents of Hankou and the integrity of the Japanese concession were narrowly secured by the machine guns of the naval landing party. Subsequently anti-Japanese sentiment among the Chinese rose. But in light of the turbulent situation in China, which gave rise to the usurpation of British concessions at Hankou and Jiujiang, as well as the Nanjing Incident, the Japanese response was an unavoidable and necessary one. Chinese communists and insurgents, aware of Japan's non-interventionist policy, may have planned the Hankou Incident under the assumption that Japan would take no action. Nevertheless, to avoid a recurrence of the Nanjing Incident, Japan wisely used force to ensure the safety of Japanese citizens in the Hankou Incident.

### **Shidehara's stance inhibits Anglo-Japanese cooperation**

The NRA's use of military force against the British concessions in Hankou and Jiujiang in January 1927 awakened the Japanese to the necessity of a partnership with the UK. Former Prime Minister Kiyoura Keigo, for instance, emphasized the importance of international cooperation. He argued that malevolent Russian forces were responsible for the Hankou Incident, and that the real source of chaos was a breakdown in cooperation between leading nations.<sup>3</sup> There were indications in 1925, when the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff took place in Beijing, that the British were interested in a partnership with Japan as well. Sir Charles Eliot, British ambassador to Japan at the time, submitted a report stating that if the British properly appraised the danger of Soviet activity in the East and West, "[s]o far as the East is concerned I personally feel that it is to our advantage to work with Japan rather than with the United States ... ."<sup>4</sup> His remarks are said to have made a strong impression on King George V.<sup>5</sup>

The Four-Power Treaty, a product of the Washington Naval Conference, sounded the death knell of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. A few more years brought the threat of communism to the fore, and with it, advocacy of a strong need for a new Anglo-Japanese partnership.

In December 1925 British officials expressed an interest in cooperating with Japan in China. Though the Japanese Army was of the same mind, Shidehara seemed indifferent to the idea. Finding Shidehara's stance formidable and dangerous, Eliot was more perplexed than surprised. He believed that Shidehara embodied the peaceful indications shown in Japan's withdrawal from Shandong, northern Karafuto (Sakhalin), and eastern Siberia, and suggested that whatever Japan had once been, it was now a weak nation. Eliot stated further that this cowardice, this inability to act on the ambition to become a great power, "has introduced a sort of duality and inconsistency,

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<sup>3</sup> Hosoya Chihiro, *Washington taisei no tokushitsu to hen'yō* (The nature and transformation of the Washington System) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Smith, "Sir Charles Eliot (1862-1931) and Japan" in Sir Hugh Cortazzi and Gordon Daniels, ed., *Britain and Japan 1859-1991: Themes and Personalities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 195.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner, "Kyōkutō kokusai seiji to Ei-Bei kankei" (Far Eastern international politics and Anglo-American relations) in Hosoya Chihiro and Saitō Makoto, ed., *Washington Taisei to Nichibei kankei* (The Washington System and Japanese-American Relations) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1978).

if not insincerity, into Japan's foreign policy." Eliot predicted that rather than breaking with the Western powers over China, Japan would continue to make concessions to the Chinese. He was disheartened by Shidehara's weak diplomacy toward China and the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

In July 1926, at around the time of the Northern Expedition, Sir William Tyrrell, permanent British secretary for foreign affairs, said that the British government was working to achieve peace and prosperity throughout the world. He believed that, in contrast, the Soviet Union, with its relentless anti-British propaganda, was promoting disorder throughout the world. Tyrrell was opposed to renewing the alliance, stating that the best possible solution in the Far East — reviving the Anglo-Japanese Alliance — was unfortunately closed off due to the new anti-militaristic and democratic spirit in Japan.

These opinions from British diplomatic sources seem to demonstrate that even a year or more prior to the Nanjing Incident, the British had begun to distrust Shidehara's diplomacy, and had come to the conclusion that it was hindering Anglo-Japanese cooperation on China. When the Nanjing Incident occurred, the UK and the Japanese Army both believed that it was necessary for the powers to take joint action against China. However, Shidehara's stance was close to the US policy of non-intervention in China, and needless to say, this was a position that would inhibit Anglo-Japanese cooperation.

Suppose that it was indeed Shidehara diplomacy that prevented the revival of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance at a time when both nations hoped for it, even though neither actually proposed it. And suppose Shidehara diplomacy itself lacked the forcefulness to resolve the China problem. Where, then, should we expect to find the *raison d'être* of Shidehara diplomacy? In any case, it was just a matter of time before Shidehara's foreign policy would become the target of public censure.

### **Shidehara diplomacy comes to an end**

In the wake of successive unfortunate events in Nanjing and Hankou, public opinion grew more and more critical of Shidehara diplomacy. Even *Asahi Shinbun*, then considered Japan's most progressive daily, pointed out the failings of government policies intended to protect Japanese residents of China. The newspaper carried an editorial on April 5, 1927, an excerpt from which follows:

We are warning China to weigh her actions carefully. We issue the same warning to Foreign Minister Shidehara, who is not doing what should be done, who is not exhausting every possibility, but is instead "keeping close watch on the situation."

All Japan's newspapers reprovved Shidehara for his inaction in connection with the two incidents.

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<sup>6</sup> James B. Crowley, "Nichi-Ei kyōchō e no mosaku" (The pursuit of Anglo-Japanese cooperation) in Hosoya Chihiro and Saitō Makoto, ed., *Washington Taisei to Nichibei kankei* (The Washington System and Japanese-American Relations) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1978).

On April 13, 1927 the Wakatsuki Cabinet submitted a proposal to the Privy Council for the issuance of an emergency decree to rescue the Taiwan Bank. At a plenary session of the council on April 17 aspersions were cast on the manner in which diplomacy with China was being conducted. The emergency decree proposal was rejected on constitutional grounds, forcing the Wakatsuki Cabinet to resign *en masse* on the same day. The Privy Council's opposition to the proposal was simply a means to an end: to topple a government because of its feeble diplomacy. The mandate to form the next cabinet fell to Tanaka Giichi, the leader of the Seiyukai, one of the main political parties; he was also a general in the Japanese Army.

### **Incautiously optimistic about communism**

Ujita Naoyoshi, who wrote a biography of Shidehara, appraises his diplomacy as follows.

Shidehara's diplomacy with China did not take into account the fact that the NRA was turning communist. He was wont to approach diplomacy with a spirit of compassion and tolerance. Therefore, when confronted with the Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hankou incidents, Foreign Minister Shidehara adopted an attitude that more closely resembled acquiescence than a non-interventionist stance. This caused great anxiety and dissatisfaction in the upper echelons of Japanese politics and the military, and caused confidence in Shidehara diplomacy to plummet.

(...)

The ideas embodied in Shidehara diplomacy are generally accepted or even lauded by those who concern themselves with diplomacy and international problems. However, no matter from what perspective one examines his views on the CCP, it is impossible to agree with them. Moreover, the consequences of his diplomacy could in no way be described as beneficial, either to Japan or to Shidehara himself. He was again appointed foreign minister when the second Wakatsuki Cabinet took office. Shidehara failed to achieve his diplomatic objectives during his dealings with the revolutionary diplomacy of the GMD largely because he failed to familiarize himself sufficiently with the CCP. His failure tells us that his powers of discernment were not entirely accurate. Was that the only flaw in Shidehara diplomacy? No, there is another that must be mentioned. Because Shidehara placed an inordinate amount of confidence in his own opinions, and was overly quick to promote principles and neglect practical problems, and because he was extremely idealistic and dogmatic, he lacked the political sense to perceive the current reality and the trends in public sentiment, and then take appropriate measures. Consequently, he was unable to reconcile his own principles with pressing demands. Moreover, overconfidence often drove him to challenge the trends of the times more than necessary, thus intensifying the current of opposition against him. This was, in fact, a major flaw that obstructed the furtherance of Shidehara diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

Ujita's scalpel exposes, with finesse, the problems plaguing Shidehara's personality and diplomacy.

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<sup>7</sup> Ujita Naoyoshi, *Shidehara Kijūrō* (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 1958).