

3. TANAKA DIPLOMACY'S RESPONSE TO THE NORTHERN EXPEDITION

First Shandong Expedition

Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi's cabinet took office on April 20, 1927. Tanaka, serving concurrently as foreign minister, announced his administration's policy guidelines on April 22 for both domestic and foreign consumption. According to those guidelines, the Japanese government was prepared to offer empathy and support to China, but would need to give due consideration to the procedures and methods used to satisfy the requirements of the Chinese people. They state that Japan was fully committed to the achievement of world peace, at the same time emphasizing the importance of Japan's keeping abreast of developments in the CCP, and cooperating with other nations if necessary. Aside from the reference to communism, Tanaka's guidelines were not radically different from the philosophy underpinning Shidehara diplomacy.

Both in Japan and abroad there were hopes (and in some cases, fears) that Japan's China policy would change with the new administration. Historian Iriye Akira commented on the matter as follows:

It is evident that for a month after he came to power Tanaka faithfully followed his predecessor's China policy. They shared an image of a new era based on solid understanding between Japan and China. The existence of Chinese radicals was an obstacle to this scheme, and both Shidehara and Tanaka did all they could to support any movement against them. But even Tanaka could not keep up with the rapidly changing developments of events in China, and these in time caused him to depart in certain respects from the policies formulated by Shidehara.¹

As Prof. Iriye indicates, there was no deceit in Tanaka's policies. When he said that he cared about and wanted to help China, he meant every word, and his desire for world peace was no less fervent. All those sentiments are communicated to us through his words, actions, and policies. However, the way in which conditions in China evolved was harsh and tragic, without regard for Tanaka's hopes and ideals.

In the meantime, the strife between north and south in our neighboring nation continued to intensify. As the NRA advanced northward, the irresistible force of Chiang's army's put a damper on the prospects of the northern armies, which worsened day by day, with retreat after retreat.

At the time the prime minister was optimistic, believing that a compromise between the northern and southern forces might be possible, since Chiang's army seemed likely to defeat the communists in Wuhan. But Tanaka changed his mind when the Shandong army was defeated along the Tianjin-Pukou Railway, the Fengtian army suffered an even worse defeat along the Beijing-Hankou Railway, and a crisis was imminent in Jinan and locations in the Beijing-Tianjin area. The prime minister realized that he would have to dispatch troops to protect Japanese civilians.

¹ Iriye, *op. cit.*, 144-45.

At the time there were approximately 24,000 Japanese civilians in China: 1,233 in Jinan, 6,746 in Tianjin, 1,586 in Beijing, and 13,621 in Qingdao. Total Japanese investment amounted to approximately ¥200 million.

On May 30 the First Shandong Expedition, comprising approximately 2,000 members of the 33rd Infantry Brigade (four battalions) under the 10th Division based in Port Arthur, departed from Dalian, landing in Qingdao on June 1. The Japanese government had announced that it would immediately withdraw its troops once it had ascertained that there was no longer a threat to Japanese citizens in China.

There were strong objections to the dispatching of Japanese troops from the Beijing, Wuhan, and Nanjing governments. But ironically, Chinese residents of the Shandong area welcomed the Japanese presence, since it enabled them to avoid being caught up in the ravages of warfare. In contrast, in south China, far away from Shandong, along the Yangzi, the boycott of Japanese goods was in full force, abetted and encouraged by the Nanjing government.

The notable liberal foreign policy commentator Kiyosawa Kiyoshi wrote the following about the protests from the Beijing, Nanjing, and Hankou governments as follows:

All of these protests from China's governments were unreasonable, rooted as they were in the notion that the dispatching of Japanese troops violated both Chinese sovereignty and international law. At that time, we were at a loss as to how the sovereignty of a nation from which three protests emanated simultaneously could be violated. (...) Is international law based upon the premise that every nation has three institutions claiming to be legitimate governments? Our minds, unaccustomed to diplomatic debate, were utterly unable to negotiate that labyrinth.²

Perhaps it is possible to interpret these remarks as a lament for the unusual situation in China, where warlords and the CCP, both in disarray, were vying for supremacy, and where there was no responsible, unified government. Under those circumstances international law could not possibly be applied to China.

Since Chiang's NRA had suffered serious defeats at the hands of northern forces, his status plummeted. Because he announced his resignation on August 14, the Northern Expedition was suspended, and the threat to the Shandong area eliminated.

In early September the Japanese government decided that there was no longer a need to station troops in Shandong, and as had previously been announced, withdrew its troops. The speedy departure was met with praise for Japan.

Even China appreciates Japan's Eastern Conference

When Tanaka formed his Cabinet, he had received special instructions from the Emperor to conduct diplomacy with caution and prudence. Perhaps because of those instructions, the prime minister personally assumed the role of foreign minister. Tanaka decided to summon Japanese

² *Chūō Kōron*, July 1927.

officials assigned to China to Tokyo for a major liaison conference. Those men would work together with central government officials to formulate a China policy. That gathering became known as the Eastern Conference.

Since Tanaka had taken charge of national policy when Shidehara diplomacy failed, it was his duty to hold a conference to reexamine the situation in China and design an appropriate diplomatic approach. The prime minister's swift, decisive action was indeed commendable.

The conference was held from June 27 to July 7, 1927. In attendance from the central government were Tanaka Giichi, prime minister and foreign minister; Mori Kaku, parliamentary vice-minister for foreign affairs; Debuchi Katsuji, vice-minister for foreign affairs, and five other Foreign Ministry bureaucrats. Representing the Army were Hata Shunroku, parliamentary vice-minister of the Army and three others. Representing the Navy were Ōsumi Mineo, parliamentary vice-minister of the Navy and two others. Officials serving in China who attended the conference were Yoshizawa Kenkichi, minister to China; Yoshida Shigeru, consul general in Fengtian; Takao Tōru, consul general in Hankou; Yada Shichitarō, consul general in Shanghai; Kodama Hideo, governor of the Guandong Leased Territory; Mutō Nobuyoshi, commander in chief of the Guandong Army; and Asari Saburō, director of the Police Affairs Bureau, Government-General of Korea.

The conference included approximately five plenary sessions, during which reports and opinions concerning the political situation in various parts of China were presented by China-based officials as well as representatives of Japan's central government. Also discussed were problems relating to Manchuria and Mongolia, the revival of Japanese commercial activity in the Yangzi region, relief measures for Japanese residents who had been uprooted, and the amendment of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation (concluded in 1896), as well as violations of that treaty. On July 7, the last day of the conference, Tanaka produced his Overview of China Policy, which was distributed in Japan and abroad. Its essential points follow.

- (1) As far as the domestic conflict in China is concerned, we shall respect the will of the Chinese people, rather than favoring any one party or faction.
- (2) We shall cooperate wholeheartedly with legitimate national demands from moderate elements in China.
- (3) The position of the Japanese government regarding each of the Chinese governments shall be exactly the same; in the event that there is progress toward the establishment of a common government, we shall welcome and support that progress.
- (4) In the event that Japan's rights and interests in China, and the lives and property of Japanese residents of China are unlawfully compromised, we reserve the right to take robust defensive action.
- (5) Manchuria and Mongolia, especially the three eastern provinces (Manchuria), are of great importance to Japan from the standpoint of our national defense and survival. We believe that these regions require special consideration from Japan, and that it is our responsibility as a neighboring nation to ensure that both nationals and foreigners can live peacefully in those regions. We shall promote the economic activity of both nationals and foreigners in Manchuria and Mongolia in accordance with the principles of the Open Door Policy and equal opportunity.

- (6) We shall support influential individuals in the three eastern provinces who respect our special status in Manchuria and Mongolia, and who make sincere efforts to stabilize the political situation there.
- (7) In the unlikely event that unrest spreads to Manchuria and Mongolia, and Japan's special rights and interests in the region are likely to be compromised, regardless of whence the threat emanates, we must be prepared to take appropriate steps immediately to protect said special rights and interests, and ensure that the affected regions remain places where nationals and foreigners can live and prosper in peace.

Vice-minister Mori provided an explication of the aforementioned overview. For instance, in connection with (5), he stated that Japan would not adopt a closed policy in Manchuria and Mongolia, but rather “shall welcome foreigners, including citizens of the UK, the US, France, and even Russia to invest in Manchuria and Mongolia in the spirit of the Open Door Policy and equal opportunity. In other words, I would like Manchuria and Mongolia to become the most peaceful places in all of China. Recently I encouraged the Russian ambassador to apply these principles to Siberia as well.” Mori's comment to the effect that Tanaka was not implying that Japan had exclusive rights in Manchuria or Mongolia, but that both regions should be opened, even to Russia, is noteworthy.

Furthermore, regarding (6), which discusses supporting influential persons in the three eastern provinces, Mori stated, “If Zhang Zuolin returns to the three eastern provinces to protect the territory and ensure peace, we shall, of course, support him. Moreover, should another individual govern the three eastern provinces, and do so in a manner consistent with our principles and policies, we should support that individual. In summary, the language of the overview is not intended to support Zhang Zuolin or to reject him. Our actions shall be guided by our own, independent position.” Mori was saying that from an impartial and nonpartisan stance, Japan would welcome and support anyone who administers the three eastern provinces, provided that that individual thought along the same lines as Japan, pursued economic development, maintained order, strove to achieve political stability, and practiced equal opportunity.

Up to a point, the conclusions reached by the Eastern Conference, as far as China proper was concerned, were in keeping with policies favored by Shidehara. The basic policy, i.e., respecting the will of the Chinese people and empathizing with their needs, supporting moderate elements, and encouraging the development of a unified government does not budge an inch from Shidehara diplomacy. But the latter part of the Overview of China Policy states that resolute defensive measures would be taken against transgressions by communist elements against Japanese interests in China and the lives and property of Japanese nationals. It also stated that if the unrest spread to Manchuria and Mongolia, and Japan's special status and interests were threatened, Japan would not hesitate to protect them. This portion certainly differed from Shidehara's passive, ineffective policies, and probably gave rise to the term “assertive Tanaka diplomacy.”

However, these arguments about defending Japanese interests in China, and the special status of Manchuria and Mongolia, were reasonable ones to broach when we recall the deleterious effects of inaction and passivity on Japanese interests in China, and on the safety of Japanese citizens during the era of Shidehara diplomacy. This was certainly not a sudden adoption on Tanaka's part of a new “assertive” policy that completely departed from Shidehara diplomacy.

After the Eastern Conference ended Yoshizawa Kenkichi, minister to China, stopped in Nanjing prior to returning to his base in Beijing. The first foreign diplomat to visit the region following the GMD's taking of Beijing, Yoshizawa received a warm welcome from the Foreign Affairs Department and General Headquarters. In a speech Hu Hanmin, head of the GMD Legislative Yuan, said that he welcomed the China policy adopted by the Eastern Conference.

For that very reason, I feel no need to comment on the extent to which the account describing the expedition to Shandong and the Eastern Conference in Japanese history textbooks deviates from the truth.

In April 1927 the Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek, established a Nationalist government in Nanjing, and escalated its Northern Expedition, an effort to unite China through the conquest of the northern warlords. The Tanaka Cabinet, fearing that the unification of China might result in Japan's losing its interests in Manchuria and Mongolia, sent an expedition to Shandong on the pretext of protecting Japanese citizens in that region, plotted to use military force to interfere in the Northern Expedition, and convened the Eastern Conference, where the decision to adopt an uncompromising diplomatic policy was made.³

³ *Kaitei Nihonshi* (Japanese history: revised edition) (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 1989).