

THE WORLD CRISIS AND
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

The
Undeclared War

1940-1941

by

WILLIAM L. LANGER

and

S. EVERETT GLEASON



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It was at this point that Japanese officialdom, like the public, was stunned by the news of the Nazi offensive against Soviet Russia. True, there was no good reason why the Foreign Office and the General Staff should have been surprised. During Matsuoka's visit to Berlin in April, 1941, Ribbentrop had made it quite clear that a conflict between Germany and Soviet Russia should not be ruled out of Japanese calculations. Furthermore, the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin, General Oshima, had reported on June 6 that, after a conversation with Hitler, he was convinced that a Nazi assault on the Soviet Union was in the offing. Ten days later the Japanese Military Attaché in Berlin had reported that war was imminent, though the exact timing was not yet known. These items of intelligence had been carefully weighed in Tokyo, but Matsuoka, General Tojo and indeed the whole Liaison Conference discounted them. The Ambassador in Moscow was of the opinion that war was unlikely, despite the obvious tension. Like the officials of many other Governments, the Japanese concluded that the German threat to the east was designed to camouflage a coming assault on Britain and that, even if genuine, the Nazi-Soviet crisis would be resolved by Stalin's acceptance of new and stiffer German demands. When events disproved these estimates, Tokyo was dismayed and shaken. For the second time Hitler had presented his Far Eastern partner with a *fait accompli*. Ambassador Grew and other observers considered the Nazi move such an affront to the Japanese that Matsuoka's resignation seemed inevitable. According to later testimony, Prince Konoye did in fact regard Hitler's action as a betrayal of Japanese confidence and therefore favored withdrawal from the Tripartite Pact.²

In the new policy discussions which now ensued the Prime Minister took the stand that Japan had joined the Tripartite Pact on the assumption that Soviet Russia would presently be brought into the Axis combination, thus creating a strong united front against Britain and its allies and friends. By his new aggression Hitler had destroyed the basis of the alliance and had left Japan to face a probable coalition of Britain, Soviet Russia and the United States. But Konoye's arguments carried little weight either with Matsuoka or the military chiefs. Apart from the fact that there were no adequate grounds for surprise at Hitler's move, Matsuoka felt deeply committed to

¹ 10, 1941 (German Foreign Office memo, in *Tokyo War Crimes Documents*, Exhibit 586). See also the tels. between Tokyo and Berlin of June 16 and 21, 1941, in *Pearl Harbor Attack*, XIV, 1397-98.

² "Kido Diary" (*Tokyo War Crimes Documents*, Nos. 1632W-51 and 1632W-54); "Tojo Memorandum" (*ibid.*, Proceedings, 36254 ff.). It is interesting to note that on June 15 the newspaper *Nichi Nichi* quoted General Yamashita, Chief of the Japanese Military Mission in Berlin, as saying that something great would happen soon (Tolischus, in *The New York Times*, June 16, 1941), and that on June 20, 1941, Ambassador Biddle reported that the British had learned from Tokyo that ten days previously Ribbentrop had told Oshima of the coming attack and had suggested a Japanese assault on Siberia (letter of Biddle to Hull, June 20, 1941). On Grew's reaction we have used tels. from Grew, June 25 and July 27, 1941, and the *Grew Diary* (MS.), summary for June, 1941.

the Germans and was much impressed by the new vistas opened for Japan by the Nazi-Soviet conflict. Early in May, 1941, he had assured the German Ambassador, probably on his own responsibility, that "no Japanese Premier or Foreign Minister would ever be able to keep Japan neutral in the event of a German-Russian conflict. In this case, Japan would be driven, by the force of necessity, to attack Russia at Germany's side. No neutrality pact could change this." In consonance with this conviction, the Foreign Minister now blandly told the Soviet Ambassador that if the Tripartite Pact and Japan's Neutrality Agreement with the Soviet Union should prove at variance with each other, the latter would have to be dropped. Matsuoka, though the father of the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact of April, 1941, had no compunctions about scrapping that agreement if it seemed in Japan's interest to do so. Nothing seemed to him more obvious than that the situation, after June 22, called for such action: the Nazi attack on Japan's traditional enemy clearly presented a golden opportunity to launch an assault on Soviet Siberia to eliminate once and for all the threat of Communist power and realize Nippon's long-cherished objectives in continental East Asia.³

By-passing the Prime Minister, Matsuoka hurried to the Imperial Palace to expound his grand design, but only to meet with a cool and skeptical reception. The Emperor questioned whether the Army chiefs would consider their forces adequate for operations in the north as well as in the south and implied that the plans already agreed upon should be adhered to. The military men soon proved the Emperor right. General Tojo opined that an attack on Soviet Siberia should be carefully weighed, and for good reasons. The Japanese Kwantung Army had suffered severe reverses at the hands of the Soviet forces in 1938 and 1939 and was currently inferior to the autonomous Soviet Far Eastern Army in numbers, planes and tanks. In the event of war the Japanese could hardly hope for success in ground operations, while it was almost certain that the Soviets would raise havoc with their submarine fleet, concentrated at Vladivostok, and might even subject Tokyo to heavy air attack. In addition it could be argued that the Germans would soon defeat the Soviet forces singlehanded or at least oblige the Kremlin to withdraw a large part of its forces from East Asia to Europe, thus creating a more favorable opportunity for Japanese operations. Meanwhile there was no prospect of Japan's securing in the north the oil and raw materials it so sorely needed. These could be obtained only in the south, for which reason it seemed most inadvisable to abandon the program already in process of execution.

³ Tel. from Ott to Berlin, May 6, 1941 (*Tokyo War Crimes Documents*, Exhibit 1068); "Kido Diary" (*ibid.*, Document No. 1632W-55); Kido deposition (*ibid.*, Defense Document No. 2502); Konoye memorandum (*ibid.*, Defense Document No. 1580); diary of K. A. Smetanin, the Soviet Ambassador, June 25, 1941 (*ibid.*, Document No. 1886). See also the "Konoye Memoirs" in *Pearl Harbor Attack*, XX, 3993 ff.

The issue of how best to exploit the situation created by Hitler's new aggression led to Matsuoka's loss of Army support and left him almost alone on one side of the argument. Nevertheless, he could fall back on a lengthy series of cables from Berlin and could plead the danger of jeopardizing the whole Japanese position as established by the Tripartite Pact. Ribbentrop, aided and abetted by Oshima, did his utmost to convince the Japanese that the backbone of Soviet resistance was already broken and the collapse of Communist power imminent. If only Japan would intervene at once, he reasoned, the Soviet defeat could be clinched and the Communist menace disposed of:

el. [Ribbentrop's message to Matsuoka, July 1, 1941]

The approaching collapse of the military power of Russia and the probable fall of the Bolshevik regime itself offers to Japan the unique opportunity to free herself from the Russian threat and to give the Japanese Empire security in the north, which is a necessary prerequisite to her expansion in the south in accordance with her vital needs. It seems to me, therefore, the requirement of the hour that the Japanese Army should, as quickly as possible, get possession of Vladivostok and push as far as possible towards the west. The aim of such an operation should be that, before the coming of cold weather, the Japanese Army advancing westward should be able to shake hands at the half-way mark with the German troops advancing to the east, that both by way of the Trans-Siberian Railroad and by air uninterrupted communication should be established between Germany and Japan by way of Russian territory, and that finally the whole Russian question should be solved by Germany and Japan in a way which would eliminate the Russian threat to both Germany and Japan for all time.

This once accomplished, added Ribbentrop, Germany's victory over Britain would soon become "an irrevocable fact," while Japan would have less difficulty in settling the China Incident and would secure a perfectly free hand for expansion to the south. For, he argued, the speedy liquidation of Soviet Russia would "probably be the best way to convince the United States of the absolute futility of entering into the war on the side of England, then completely isolated and facing the most powerful alliance of the earth."⁴

Alluring though the prospect, the Japanese military leaders, like the majority of the Cabinet, remained unmoved, even after the Liaison Conference had met six times in five days to canvass the arguments pro and con.⁵ In the end the question reduced itself to considerations of capability and priority. Effective military control of all Indo-China was regarded as essen-

⁴ Tel. from Ribbentrop to Ott, June 28, 1941 (*Tokyo War Crimes Documents*, No. 4081C); Ribbentrop's personal message to Matsuoka, July 1, 1941 (*Department of State Bulletin*, June 16, 1946, pp. 1040 ff.).

⁵ The Liaison Conference, though it had no constitutional position, was of crucial importance. It consisted on the one side of five Cabinet officers (the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Ministers of War and Navy, and the President of the Cabinet Planning Board), and on the other of the Chiefs of Staff of the Army and Navy, usually with their Assistant Chiefs. No proposal was submitted to the Privy Council before it had been unanimously adopted by the Liaison Conference, whose recommendation, as representing the decision of both civilian and military authorities, was invariably accepted.

extended to China the benefits of Lend-Lease and had allowed Mr. Owen Lattimore to take service with the Nationalist Government as political adviser to the Generalissimo. American officers had participated with the British and Dutch in staff conversations at Singapore and it was no secret that the United States was supplying arms and munitions to the British in Malaya and to the Dutch in the Indies. Finally, Washington had, over the preceding year, laid a series of restrictions on exports to Japan, with the result that trade in most items had been reduced to the merest trickle. All in all, the Tokyo press believed it had ample evidence of hostile encirclement and every reason to call for appropriate counteraction.¹⁴

It was against the background of such views that the Imperial Conference on July 2 took the decision to press on with its program of southern expansion, at the same time preparing for eventual war with the United States and Britain. For the time being the question of further discussions with Washington remained open and no immediate reply was made to the American note of June 21. Initially American authorities attached no particular significance to this, because they were almost unanimous in thinking that Japan would take advantage of the new situation created by Hitler to loose its forces against Soviet Siberia, meanwhile deferring action to the south.¹⁵ Although such a distraction of Japanese power would provide Britain, the Netherlands and the United States a breathing period and enable them to strengthen the defenses of Malaya, the Indies and the Philippines, any action on Tokyo's part that tended to hasten the collapse of Soviet Russia was obviously not in the British or American interest. In the effort to avert such a calamity President Roosevelt sent a personal message to Prince Konoye (July 4) calling his attention to the reports reaching Washington and expressing his reluctance to believe them, in view of the oft-repeated declarations of the Japanese Government of its desire to preserve peace in the Pacific area. However, the President put Tokyo on notice in these words: "Should Japan enter upon a course of military aggression and conquest, it stands to reason that such action would render illusory the cherished hope of the American Government, which it understood was shared by the Japanese Government, that peace in the Pacific area, far from being further upset, might now indeed be strengthened and made more secure."

Prince Konoye replied by reaffirming Japan's desire for peace in the Pacific and stating that his Government "have not so far considered the possibility of joining the hostilities against the Soviet Union." At the same

¹⁴ See particularly the Japanese Foreign Office memorandum entitled "The Anglo-American Policy of Encirclement against Japan in the Southern Pacific Ocean," dated July, 1941 (*Tokyo War Crimes Documents*, Defense Document No. 1482).

¹⁵ Memos of the Far Eastern Division, June 23, 25, 26, 1941; Far Eastern situation summary, July 10, 1941, reviewing numerous reports from abroad forecasting a Japanese attack on Soviet Russia. On the persistence of this conviction in American military and naval circles see Watson: *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations*, 494-96.

Toyoda, too, seems to have missed the point completely. When Ambassador Grew queried him on the matter, he asserted that he had never heard of it. Conceivably he took this line because he was unable to hold out much hope that his Government would retrace its course. On July 28 the Japanese forces were already disembarking at Saigon.⁵⁸

The evidence indicates that Mr. Roosevelt himself counted more on the threat of comprehensive sanctions than on his neutralization proposal to deter the Japanese Government. The requisite orders had been agreed to in conference between the State Department, the Treasury and the Attorney General and were ready for issuance on the morning of July 26, 1941. On July 25 the War and Navy Departments, with the President's approval, warned American commanders in the Pacific of what was coming. The commanders were told that no immediate hostile action on the part of Japan was anticipated, but that "appropriate precautionary measures" might well be instituted. On the evening of July 25 a press release from Hyde Park announced the forthcoming freeze. In a message to Mr. Harry Hopkins (July 26) the President requested his emissary to inform Mr. Churchill that he thought the Anglo-American action with regard to Japan was already bearing fruit: "I hear their Government much upset and no conclusive future policy has been determined on. Tell him [Mr. Churchill] in great confidence that I have suggested to Nomura that Indo-China be neutralized by Britain, Dutch, Chinese, Japan and ourselves, placing Indo-China somewhat in status of Switzerland. Japan to get rice and fertilizer but all on condition that Japan withdraw armed forces from Indo-China *in toto*. I have had no answer yet. When it comes, it will probably be unfavorable, but we have at least made one more effort to avoid Japanese expansion to South Pacific."⁵⁹

The executive order freezing all Japanese funds and assets in the United States was duly issued on July 26, 1941, and was accompanied, on the same day, by the British and Dominion denunciations of trade treaties with Japan and the imposition of various financial restrictions. The Netherlands Government, not fully posted by London, as had been expected, was much

fense Document No. 1401D-1). On Nomura's disabilities it is worth quoting from the *Grew Diary (MS.)*, August 5, 1941: "We have all too much evidence that the Japanese Embassy in Washington is half the time asleep at the switch either in failing to understand statements made by our Government or in failing to report them promptly, accurately and comprehensively. This view, I am confidentially informed, is shared by the Foreign Office here."

⁵⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Japan*, II, 318 ff., 534 ff.; *Tokyo War Crimes Documents, Proceedings*, 36,251 ff., and Defense Document No. 1683. The Japanese public announcement of July 26, 1941, is given in *Documents on American Foreign Relations*, IV, 502. See also André Gaudel: *L'Indochine française en face du Japon* (Paris, 1947), 117 ff.

⁵⁹ Text in *Pearl Harbor Attack*, XX, 4374, and now in *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters*, II, 1189-90. The joint State-Treasury Department memo, dated July 25, 1941, is in the *Morgenthau Diaries (MS.)*, Vol. 424, pp. 268 ff. For the War and Navy Department warnings, see Mark S. Watson: *Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations*, 495.