

ON THE TRI-PARTITE ALLIANCE

by Fumimaro Konoye

The idea of a military alliance between Japan, Germany and Italy was proposed by Germany in the summer of 1938, conveyed by Major General Oshima, then Japanese Military Attache in Berlin, and submitted for consideration to the Japanese Cabinet of which I was Prime Minister for the first time. It was a plan to convert the Tripartite Anti-Comintern Pact, which was in force at that time into a military alliance, the principal target being the U. S. S. R. The matter was handed down to Baron Hiranuma's Cabinet when it succeeded mine in January 1939. Deliberations were given the matter by the five Ministers Conference of the Hiranuma Cabinet which met in as many as seventy odd sessions for that purpose. But, in August of that year, before they were able to come to a conclusion, Germany, without previously communicating it to the Japanese Government suddenly announced the conclusion of a non-aggression pact with Soviet Russia against whom the proposed alliance was to be directed. This wholly unexpected turn of events, which the greatly embarrassed Hiranuma Cabinet described as "intricate and baffling", (words now famous in this country) immediately brought to an end the life of the cabinet itself as well as the whole scheme of an alliance against Russia.

In the spring of 1940, however, when the overwhelming military strength of Germany had swept across western Europe and threatened, as it appeared, the existence of Great Britain, the question of a Tripartite military alliance again became a nation-wide topic of great popularity. However, inasmuch as the alliance this time was to be directed against Great Britain and the United States and not against the U.S.S.R as in the previous year, there was a fundamental difference in nature between the two plans. When I was honored with an Imperial Command to form a cabinet for the second time, anti-Anglo-Saxon sentiments and enthusiasm for a Tripartite Alliance were at their height, especially among the military circles and some groups of the people among the nation.

The Tripartite Alliance was formally concluded on 27 September 1940. Minister Stahmer had been sent to Japan by the German Government as the personal representative of Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, and on 9th and 10th September he held discussions with our Foreign Minister Mr. Matsuoka. Since the record of those conversations throws much light upon the specific objectives of the alliance as well as the circumstances in which it was agreed upon, an excerpt of it is given as follows:

1. Germany does not want the present conflict to develop into a world war, and she wishes to bring it to termination as quickly as possible. She particularly wants the United States to stay out.

2. Germany does not look for Japan's military assistance at this juncture in connection with her war with England.

3. What she wants of Japan is to play the role of restraining and preventing the United States from entering the war, by all means. Although Germany does not think at present that the United States will enter the war, she cannot take a chance.

4. It is, so Germany believes, to the mutual advantage of both Japan and Germany to enter into an understanding or agreement, whereby they will be thoroughly prepared effectively to meet an emergency, at any moment. This only can prevent, if anything can prevent, America from entering the present war, or entering into an armed conflict with Japan in the future.

5. A strong and determined attitude, unequivocal and unmistakable, on the part of the three nations, Japan, Germany, and Italy, and the knowledge of it by the United States and the world at large at this juncture. That alone can be of a powerful and effective deterrent on the United States. A weak, lukewarm attitude or declaration at this juncture will only invite danger.

6. Germany hopes that Japan will also estimate the importance of the situation, realize the magnitude and the reality of the potential (perhaps impending for all we may know) danger coming from the Western Hemisphere, and act quickly and decisively to forestall it by reaching an agreement among the three of such a nature that neither the United States nor the rest of the world would be left in doubt.

7. It is better first to reach an agreement among Germany, Italy, and Japan and then, immediately to approach Soviet Russia. Germany is prepared to act the part of an honest go-between on the question of rapprochement between Japan and Soviet Russia, and she can see no unsurmountable obstacles in the path; it may be settled without much difficulty. German-Russia Relations are good, contrary to what the British propaganda claims and Russia is carrying out all her commitments to the full satisfaction of Germany.

8. Despite the fact that the Axis (including Japan) must be thoroughly prepared to meet the worst emergency, Germany will, on the other hand, make use of every means in her power to prevent a clash between the United States and Japan, and even to improve relations between the two, if it is humanly possible.

9. Stahmer's words may be regarded as coming directly from Ribbentrop.

As is clear from the above record of the conversations, there were two specific objectives in concluding the Tripartite Pact. The first was to prevent the United States from participating in the war in Europe and thus to forestall the spreading of the war; the second, to secure friendly relations between Japan and the U.S.S.R.

1. Prevention of the American Participation in the War

H. M. the Emperor proclaimed in the Imperial Rescript issued on the occasion of the conclusion of the Treaty, "We earnestly desire that war be terminated and peace restored as quickly as possible". At that time he had in mind the prevention of a world-wide spread of the war, and especially, the prevention of American participation in it. With reference, however, to whether the Tripartite Alliance would serve that purpose, opinion was sharply divided. At the Imperial Conference immediately preceding the conclusion of the proposed Alliance, a member argued that the United States had hitherto been refraining from bringing pressure upon Japan, lest such an action impel Japan to go over to the Axis side, but any decisive move on our part to draw closer to Germany and Italy, so far from functioning as a warning to America, would greatly stiffen her attitude towards us, inasmuch as she was a proud nation; he concluded that the proposed Alliance would only render the adjustment of our relations with the United States so much more difficult that a situation would finally arise in which a war between the two countries would become unavoidable. Mr. Matsuoka, however, contended as follows; "In the light of our experiences in the past, any attempt to improve friendly relations with the United States by our taking a courteous attitude or of sewing their good-will would not only prove utterly ineffective, but rather precipitate the present estrangement by inviting the feeling of contempt in the United States. If there is any means by which to check the deterioration of relations, and if possible, to improve them at all, that will be to assume what Minister Stahmer called a 'determined attitude.' For that purpose, it will be of the utmost importance to make as many allies as possible, and to proclaim it before the world as soon as possible, thus 'strengthening our position against the United States. While keeping ever vigilant eyes upon any repercussions which may arise of such a move on our part, I will try at the same time not to overlook any opportunity of restoring our relations with America to a more normal basis. The important point is, first of all, to show unmistakably a firm stand against the United States".

Which of these opposing views was right, or whether the conclusion of the Tripartite Alliance was effective in preventing the American participation in the war, must remain a question never answered; for in December 1941, before the United States joined the war, Japan herself, who had wanted that country to stay out, declared war upon her. One might attribute to the existence of the Tripartite Alliance the fact that, for over one

year after the proclamation of it, America did not enter the war. One thing at least is beyond doubt; that is, she persistently sought to rob the Alliance of its practical significance throughout the Japanese-American conversations opened in April 1941. I see in that fact clear evidence that the Tripartite Alliance was proved to be from the American point of view, a considerable obstacle to joining the war which could not easily be overcome.

2. Establishment of Friendly Relations with the U. S. S. R.

The second specific objective of the Tripartite Alliance was to adjust our relations with Soviet Russia through the mediation of Germany, who had succeeded in establishing friendly relations with that country with the conclusion of the Non-Aggression Pact, and, if possible, to bring about an alliance of all three by which Japan would be able to make her voice weightier against the Anglo-American combination and thus facilitate the settlement of the Sino-Japanese conflict.

For years I had keenly supported the opinion that peaceful relations between Japan and America should be consolidated. It was out of my sincere desire to make a contribution, however meagre, to the peace of the Pacific by discovering a solid basis of mutual understanding between the two peoples that, in the summer of 1934, I had a visit in the United States and met several prominent people in and out of the Government. But since then, against my wishes, Japanese - American relations had deteriorated; especially, after the outbreak of the conflict in China, they had practically gone into an impasse. After things had taken such a turn there was scarcely any hope of success as Mr. Matsuoka pointed out in the attempt to improve our relations by merely exchanging courtesy and begging for good-will. The Japanese Government had not, of course, always limited itself to such sewing of good-will. On the contrary the successive Foreign Ministers, notably Mr. Arita and Admiral Nomura, made it their principal aim in diplomacy to reach an understanding with the American Government on the greatest issue of all which lay between the two countries, namely the China problem; and their efforts to that end were truly painstaking. However, all such efforts having been proved entirely fruitless, it had now become clear that every normal approach to the American Government had been closed. Besides, the danger of Japan being left isolated looked imminent. Under such circumstances, the only possible way left open to Japan was to take sides with the side opposing America, namely Germany and Italy, and through them, together with the U. S. S. R. as well to force America to give up the idea of coercing Japan. It was not enough to combine with Germany and Italy. Only when the U. S. S. R. had been induced to join the combination, would an equilibrium of power be attained as against the Anglo-American combination, and only when such an equilibrium had been attained

would rapprochement with America become possible. The ultimate aim, then, of our attempt to combine with Germany and Russia lay also in the adjustment of our relations with America, and, as the result of such adjustment, the settlement of our long conflict with China. While on the one hand I was an ardent proponent of the adjustment of Japanese-American relations, on the other hand I advocated the opinion that we must be on guard against the U. S. S. R. The reasons for which I, who disapproved a friendship with the U. S. S. R., approved the Japanese-German-Russian combination were twofold; first, it was thought under the then prevailing circumstances, that this would be the only way to reach an understanding with the United States; second I believe that the danger from the U. S. S. R, against which we had to be on guard, could be satisfactorily mitigated by restraining her by ourselves in the east and by Germany in the west.

As is clear from the record of the Matsuoka-Stahmer conversations, Germany was under commitment to assist Japan in adjusting her relations with Soviet Russia, and Minister Stahmer, on leaving for his home country, reiterated his intention to make an effort for the realization of that objective. There is reason to believe that, at least up until November 1940, when M. Molotov visited Berlin, Germany had been moving in the direction of the Japanese-German-Russian combination. For a memorandum was sent by Herr von Ribbentrop to the Japanese Government, in which he proposed that: "A pact shall be concluded between Japan, Germany, and Italy, as one party, and the U. S. S. R. as the other . in which:

1. The U. S. S. R. should agree in principle to the Tripartite Alliance as a means of checking the spread of war and speedily restoring world peace;

2. The U. S. S. R. should recognize the leading position of Germany and Italy in Europe and of Japan in the Far East, and the three Powers should pledge themselves to respect the territorial integrity of U. S. S. R.:

3. The three Powers and the U. S. S. R. should pledge themselves not to assist any Power, or join any group of Powers, which are at war with the other contracting party.

Besides, the four contracting Powers should enter into a secret understanding that the Far East, Iran and India, Central Africa be recognized as the spheres of influence, in the future, of Japan, the U. S. S. R., Germany, and Italy respectively.

Our Government accepted the scheme, and Herr Ribbentrop presented it to M. Molotov in November of that year.

May 1941, Foreign Minister Matsuoka, on behalf of our government, sent a message to Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop to the effect that, in view of the external as well as internal situation in Japan, he wished the German Government to avoid an armed conflict with the U. S. S. R. by every means at its disposal. The German Foreign Minister's reply was that war with the U. S. S. R. was now unavoidable, but he gave assurance that it would not last longer than two or three months at most; and asked that he be trusted on this point. He further reminded that Japan was not being asked to give any assistance in that war and that, besides, she would benefit considerably from its outcome. The highest German military authorities also told Ambassador Oshima that the war would probably end within four weeks; it would hardly be called a war, but rather a police action.

On the 22d of June the war broke out. The United States and Great Britain took no time in declaring intention to aid the U. S. S. R.; the U. S. S. R. had now unmistakably joined the Anglo-American camp. Although this sudden turn in the international situation did not immediately affect Russo-Japanese relations, the hope that Japan, Germany and the U. S. S. R. might become united - the keynote of the Tripartite Alliance had now been shattered, and with communications between Japan and Germany. The Tripartite Alliance had been deprived of most of its practical usefulness.

If we call it the first German breach of faith that, while approaching the Japanese government headed by Hirohito with proposal for a tripartite alliance directed against Soviet Russia, she suddenly concluded, without any previous notice to us a non-aggression pact with that very Soviet Russia. Then might we call it the second German act of a similar nature that, notwithstanding the pledge entered into when the Tripartite Alliance was concluded to make an ally of Russia, she waged war upon Soviet Russia, disregarding our urgent reminding. Japan, then, might very well claim freedom, legal as well as moral to re-examine her whole policy pertaining to the Alliance. As a matter of fact I had informal conversations with the ministers of the fighting services as to the desirability of denouncing it outright in view of the reasons and circumstances of the conclusion of the Tripartite Alliance. However, the army leaders who had great confidence in the German High Command would not listen to such opinion. Moreover, Germany's spectacular successes at the first stages of war seemed even to heighten that confidence.

In such circumstances I reached the following conclusion. Re-examination of the Alliance policy was not feasible because of our internal political situation; besides to abrogate a treaty which had only in the preceding year been concluded would be contrary to our international faith, even though it was due to a perfidious act on the part of a co-signatory Power -- an act which scarcely constituted an excuse publicly acceptable. It was not appropriate,

therefore, to challenge the Tripartite Alliance itself. But now the war had broken out between Germany and Russia and all hope of the Japanese-German-Russian combination, one of the main aims of the Alliance, had been dashed. Under the conditions it would be extremely grave for Japan if she should be drawn into the danger of a war with the United States, a danger which might arise in the future from the Tripartite Alliance. Above all, this would completely nullify the aim for which we concluded the Alliance. Every precaution should therefore be taken against this danger.

The way to that end, in my opinion, could be sought nowhere else than in closer relationship between Japan and America. And this possibility, though despaired of a year ago, had now become rather hopeful as the United States, impelled by the necessity of rescuing Great Britain in Europe, had been seeking to avoid at any cost an entanglement with Japan in the Pacific.

Def. Doc. 1580

In fact, the Japanese-American talks had been commenced in April of that year. It was out of such considerations that I made up my mind to bring the Japanese-American conversations to a successful conclusion at any cost -- even at the cost of more or less mitigating the Tripartite Alliance.

So much for the specific objectives of the Tripartite Alliance and the circumstances which made its conclusion advisable. Since, however, in a growing sense of national crises engendered by the grave war situation in the Pacific and the defeat of Germany, a voice has been heard of late in this country, questioning the responsibility for concluding the Alliance, I feel I will take this opportunity to state my own view concerning the matter.

Translation Certificate

I, Charles S. Terry, of the Defense Language Branch, hereby certify that the foregoing translation described in the above certificate is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a correct translation and is as near as possible to the meaning of the original document.

/s/ Charlie S. Terry

Tokyo, Japan
May 20, 1947