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The Progress of Japanese-American Negotiations During the Time
of the Second and Third Konoye Cabinets

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Beginning in December 1940, conversations for the readjustment of Japanese relations were conducted secretly between Bishop Walsh, president, and Mr. Draft, administrative secretary of Maryknoll (a high institution of American Catholicism), on the one hand, and Colonel Iwakuro of the Military Affairs Bureau of the Army Ministry and Mr. Tadao Ikawa on the other.

By April 1941, the time had become ripe for the Governments of the two countries to conduct the conversations themselves. It should be remembered that because of the personal connections of the participants in the conversations from the first, private contact was maintained between between President Roosevelt himself and Mr. Hull on the American side, and between Ambassador Nomura and the Japanese Military and Naval Attachés in Washington on the Japanese side. Thus, both the President and the Japanese Ambassador were kept informed of what was going on.

On April 8th, the first tentative plan was presented by the American side, and after examining this, the Japanese side drew up a second tentative plan. On April 14th, and 16th, Mr. Hull held the first of the series of conversations on this problem with Ambassador Nomura. At this time, Mr. Hull stated that the conversations theretofore conducted by private persons might be taken over by unofficial conversations between the Secretary of State and the Ambassador, and that the negotiations might be conducted with the second tentative plan as a basis. At the same time he expressed the wish that the Ambassador obtain official instructions from his Government.

Ambassador Nomura's dispatch containing these important representations by Mr. Hull and the contents of the plan (tentatively called the Proposal for Japanese-American Understanding), which was to provide the basis for the conversations, was received at the Tokyo Foreign Office between the afternoon of April 17th and the morning of the 18th. Since Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka was the in Siberia on his way home from his visit to Europe, Mr. Ohashi, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, at 11 A.M. on the 18th, brought the first section of the dispatch to me while I was in a Cabinet conference. At 4:30 P.M. on the same day, after waiting for the cable to be decoded, he called on me at my official residence, accompanied by Mr. Terasaki, Chief of the American Bureau.

This Proposal for Understanding was to announce, in the form of a joint declaration, an agreement between the two Governments on several fundamental items necessary for breaking the deadlock between the two countries. Detailed agreements were to be arranged by a Japanese-American conference to follow the joint declaration.

In view of the importance of the matter, I summoned a joint conference of high government and military leaders for 8 o'clock that very night.

The Government was represented by the Premier, the Home Minister, the War and Navy Ministers and also by Mr. Ohashi, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Chiefs of the Army and Naval General Staffs represented the Supreme Command. Also present were the Directors of the Military Affairs Bureaus of the War and Navy Ministries, and the Chief Cabinet Secretary. The consensus of opinion regarding the American proposal was as follows:

1. Acceptance of the American proposal would be the speediest way toward disposal of the China Incident. That is to say, no effective results had been obtained by the setting-up of the Wang Régime, direct negotiations with Chungking were becoming more difficult, and Chungking was entirely dependent upon America; consequently negotiations with Chungking were possible only through the good offices of America. In view of these facts it was quite clear that acceptance of the American proposal would be the speediest way toward disposal of the China Incident.

2. To accede to this proposal and to plan for a rapprochement between the two countries would not only provide the best means of avoiding a Japanese-American war, but would also be a prerequisite to preventing the European war from assuming the magnitude of a world war and to the creation of world peace.

3. The considerable depletion of Japan's national strength made it desirable to restore and cultivate that strength by disposing of the China Incident as quickly as possible. For the success of Japan's southward advance which was being advocated in certain quarters, the supreme command itself confessed to having neither the confidence of success nor the necessary preparation. The cultivation of national strength, moreover, necessitated the temporary restoration of amicable relations with America and planning for the replenishment of the supply of vital commodities for the future.

Thus, the participants were in favor of accepting the American proposal. However, the following items were brought forth as conditions acceptance.

1. It should be made clear that there would be no infringement of the Tripartite Pact. This was considered axiomatic in view of Japan's keeping faith with Germany.

2. It should be made more clear that the object of Japanese-American cooperation was the promotion of world peace. If the understanding between the two countries were to relieve America of her commitments in the Pacific and thus afford her an opportunity for increasing her support of Britain, Japan would be breaking faith with Germany, which would be improper, and it would constitute a lowering of the tone of the whole concept of the proposal.

3. The contents of the proposal were too complex.

4. Since the text gives the impression of a return to the old world order, clearer expression should be given to the constructive side of the proposal, namely, the idea of building a New Order.

5. Speedy action was necessary to avoid the probable leakage of intelligence. For this reason the return of the Foreign Minister to Japan must be urged.

After the joint conference on the 18th, the Army, Navy and Foreign Office immediately started examination of the proposal. In the meantime, Terasaki, Chief of the American Bureau of the Foreign Office, wished to cable instructions to Ambassador Nomura to transmit to America Japan's "acceptance in principle" of the proposal. Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ohashi, although in favor of the idea, vetoed it; he insisted that the answer be dispatched after the Foreign Minister's return. Foreign Minister Matsuoka finally reached Dairen on the 20th, and I got in touch with him by telephone. It was learned later that the Foreign Minister then said to persons close to him, "The American proposal has probably come as the fruit of what I said in Moscow to Mr. Steinhart, the American Ambassador to Soviet Russia". In fact, the Foreign Minister on his way, both to and from Europe, had held conversations in Moscow with Mr. Steinhart, an old acquaintance, asking him to urge President Roosevelt, if the latter was really fond of gambling, to have faith in Japan and to lend a helping hand for the sake of Sino-Japanese peace. Matsuoka had reported this to me by cable under the date of April 8th, and apparently had been secretly expecting his move to bear fruit.

Because of adverse weather, the Foreign Minister was delayed a day, returning to Tokyo on April 22nd. Since a joint conference had been scheduled for the very evening of his arrival, the examination of the American proposal, by the Army, Navy, and Foreign Ministries, had been roughly completed on the 21st. In addition, the Army and Navy held a joint conference that same day at the Navy Club, the respective Ministers and Heads of Departments, Bureaus and Sections participating, and presented a memorandum to me which stated that "Japan must turn the American scheme to good advantage and by embracing the principles embodied in the proposal, attain the objectives of the China Incident, restore the national strength, and thereby attain a powerful voice in the establishment of world peace".

There was no denying, however, that despite his outward demeanor, the Foreign Minister was giving concentrated thought to the handling of the problems then pending between America and Japan. It was learned later that on his sick-bed Matsuoka had been closely examining both the text of the American proposal and the revision of the same which had been drawn up by the appropriate authorities of the Army, Navy and Foreign Ministries. In addition, he was also thoroughly revising the latter. A third joint conference was finally held on May 3rd.

Those participating in the conference approved, on the whole, of the revised proposal prepared by the Foreign Minister. The main points of the revision were the elimination of Item IV, "Naval Strength, Air Strength and Shipping of the two countries in the Pacific"; the insertion of a new clause under Item "2", "Attitudes of the two countries toward the European War", covering the mediation of Japan and America between Britain and Germany; and clear definitions of Japan's obligations under the Tripartite Pact. Other points were the withholding of the announcement of the China Incident peace terms, the deletion of Japan's declaration not to carry on a southward military advance, and the deletion of the agreement concerning Japanese-American conversations. . . .

With the German-Soviet question settled for the time being, the American question permitted of no more delay. Also, the Foreign Minister's ambiguous attitude could no longer be disregarded. Consequently, on July 4th, purposely using the form of a letter, I transmitted the following views to the Foreign Minister.

1. Until the settlement of the Northern question, armed force should not be used against the Southern regions, and steps should be taken toward readjustment of diplomatic relations with America. Naval leaders clearly state that to fight America and the Soviets simultaneously offers almost insurmountable difficulties. From this point of view it is advisable that the invasion of French Indo-China should, if possible, be abandoned.

2. As a result of the readjustment of diplomatic relations with America, it would be impossible to satisfy German demands. This might temporarily create an undercurrent of misunderstanding among the Axis countries, but this could not be avoided.

3. Readjustment of American-Japanese relations was also necessary in view of these three points:

- a. Expansion of national strength by acquisition of foreign goods.
- b. Prevention of American-Soviet rapprochement.
- c. Acceleration of peace negotiations with Chungking.

4. Not only was it necessary to continue the present negotiations with America, from the above point of view--it was also necessary to bring them to a successful conclusion, in the light of high national policies. Lastly, I added that "even though from the Foreign Minister's point of view a compromise between Japan and America might seem impossible, I, who carried the responsibility of vital state affairs, was obliged to do my best. Moreover, the Emperor was seriously concerned about the situation. I, therefore was determined to do my utmost, and would work for the success of negotiations even at the cost of some concessions."

The Foreign Minister said to me over the telephone that he was profoundly moved by my letter. When he saw me at my official residence the next day, the 5th, the following points were established.

"Fundamentally he was of the same mind as I. No matter what public opinion might be, he considered himself to be the most zealous person in respect to the American question. He was certainly not trying to please Germany. However, he was opposed to do anything detrimental to the Tripartite Pact. From that very day he was going to give his entire attention to the American question." At the same time, he made the significant statement that "if at any time he became a stumbling-block, he would resign his post."

Deliberations on the Japanese-American Proposal for Understanding thus began again. Joint conferences were held on July 10th and 12th, which considered the American proposal of June 21st. The special points of this June 21st proposal were as follows:

1. In the item covering the attitudes of the two countries toward the European War, the clause advocated by Japan, which proposed joint efforts of Japan and America for the restoration of peace, was deleted. This suggested by implication a determination to work to the last for the overthrow of Germany.

2. In relation to the Tripartite Pact, America proposed that "Japan. . . Make clear her intention of preventing a spreading of the European War resulting from provocative acts. This seemed to reveal an effort to have Japan make a written promise not to take up arms in the event of America's participation in the war as the result of "provocation" by Germany.

3. Concerning the China Incident, the distinction made in the first proposal between the Chiang Kai-shek Administration and the Nanking Government was omitted so as to make the recommendation of peace be to the "Chinese Government". Also, although the Kono Principles were mentioned, only that part referring to amicable relations were included, and the matter of economic cooperation and a common front against communism was omitted. On the whole this marked a general reversion to a fear of American public opinion.

4. The Sino-Japanese Peace Terms, which Japan had deleted were included in an Annex. The necessity for the establishment of perfect agreement concerning this was indicated.

5. Whereas Japan advocated limiting the economic cooperation of Japan and America to the "southwest" Pacific, this was revised to cover the entire Pacific. . . .

. . . .
This June 21st proposal was finally deliberated upon at the joint conference of July 10th.

However, in spite of my efforts, Foreign Minister Matsuoka's attitude became increasingly uncoöperative. It became clear that his attitude was one of opposition to the Japanese-American negotiations.

. . . .
At the joint conference on the 12th, the Army and Navy made a joint statement of their opinions. It differed from the Foreign Minister's in that it stated: (1) Japan's attitude toward the European War should be determined according to treaty obligations and the question of self-defense. (2) The three Konoye Principles should form the basis of dealing with the Chinese question. America might make recommendations as to an armistic and peace, but should not intervene in the peace terms. (3) Japan reserved her right to use armed forces in the Pacific in case of necessity.

On July 17th at 5:10 P.M. I was received in audience by the Emperor at the Imperial Palace and ordered to organize the Cabinet again. Commencing the selection of Cabinet members at once, I completed the task at 5:30 P.M. on the 18th. I reported to the Palace at 7:00 P.M. and presented the names of the Cabinet members. At 8:50 P.M. the newly-organized third Konoye Cabinet came into existence. The first Cabinet council was held at 9:45 P.M. The special feature of the new Cabinet was the appointment of Admiral Toyoda as Foreign Minister.

The previous Cabinet had done its utmost for the success of the Japanese-American negotiations. Particularly, the Army and Navy had maintained the closest cooperation. The opposition of

the Foreign Minister alone had caused the Cabinet's collapse. Unexpectedly, only the Foreign Minister was changed, and actually the identical Cabinet had the opportunity of again taking the stage (In addition to the Foreign Minister, four Ministers, Kanemitsu, Ogawa, Akita, and Kawada had resigned, but essentially it was a matter of Foreign Minister Matsuoka's being changed.) Thus, the mission assigned to the new Cabinet was clear to everyone.

It should be noted particularly that the Army and Navy Ministers remained in office, and that the important post of Foreign Minister was occupied by a representative of the Navy, which was most concerned with the American question, and hence had a significant voice in the matter. The Cabinet was given the additional privilege of holding joint conferences with the Supreme Command in the Imperial Palace, and launched immediately upon the attainment of its objectives, the solution of Japanese-American problems.

However, the significance of this very obvious political change was not clearly grasped by Ambassador Nomura in Washington. Because the Ambassador himself failed to understand it, almost nothing was done to convey its significance to the Americans. To the Tokyo Government, which had expected that a good impression would be made by the establishment of the new Cabinet, and that negotiations would progress swiftly now that the vague atmosphere had been dispelled, this situation was truly mortifying.

The previous Cabinet in its last days had drawn up with great pains a Japanese counter-proposal to the American proposal of June 21st, and on July 25th had dispatched it by cable. In spite of this, the Embassy at Washington had not yet presented it to the Americans, first because of the change in Cabinets, second, because of fear that its contents might not be acceptable to the Americans. This was made clear in a cable from Ambassador Nomura on July 22nd. In addition to all that, Ambassador Nomura on July 23rd, requested that he be informed of the new Cabinet's policy toward America.

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During this time, I was considering every means by which to surmount the Japanese-American crisis. Finally, I made up my mind to personally meet with the President, and on the evening of August 4th, I told both the Ministers of War and of Navy about this for the first time. My words were as follows:

"1. The President of the United States has gone so far as to say that he 'wishes to leave nothing undone,' and it is our duty, I believe, to do everything that can be done. Behind the conversations which have been held between Japan and America to date, there have been various misunderstandings and differences of sentiment, and it seems that the real intentions of each are not thoroughly understood by the other. For a statesman to allow matters to develop in this manner into war could not be justified when viewed in the light of world peace. He would not be fulfilling his duties to the Emperor, who views Japanese-American relations with particular anxiety, nor to the people. If all that could be done had been done and still there is war, there can be no help for it. In such an eventuality, our minds can be made up, and the people's will determined. Although outwardly Chamberlain of England appeared to have been deceived by Hitler on his several trips to the Continent prior to the European War, it is believed that they were effective from the standpoint of solidifying the determination of the British people.

"2. In this most critical period, it is feared that the opportune moment might be missed if negotiations are carried on through Ambassador Nomura. The Prime Minister should meet personally with the President and express straightforwardly and boldly the true intentions of the Empire. If the President still does not understand, I shall, of course, be fully prepared to break off the talks and return home. It is, therefore, an undertaking which must be carried out while being fully prepared for war against America. If, after a direct meeting with the President, an understanding cannot be obtained, the people will know that a Japanese-American war could not be avoided. This would aid in consolidating their determination. The world in general, also, would be made aware that the primary factor is not aggression and invasion. It will know that great efforts were made in behalf of maintaining peace in the Pacific. This would be advantageous to us in that the unfavorable trend of the world's public opinion would be somewhat eased.

"3. Since the matter of the President's coming to Honolulu has already been brought up in the first Proposal for Understanding, I do not believe that having it materialize is an impossibility. It is not necessary to assume from the start that the conversations will fail. Japan will insist, of course, on the firm establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. American claims will be based on the provisions of the Nine-Power Pact. The contents of these are at odds with each other. However America has stated that 'it is ready at any time to discuss making revisions to the Nine-Power Pact through legal means.' Japan's ideal, of course, is to bring about the firm establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. In view of the national potential it is too much to expect this ideal to be fulfilled at once. Therefore, I do not believe that Japanese-American talks are an impossibility if they are carried out with broadmindedness.

"4. This conference must be held soon. The outlook of the German-Soviet war indicates that the peak will become apparent in about September. If, as people in some circles predict today, a stalemate is brought about, Germany's future cannot be viewed with optimism. If that does happen, the American attitude will stiffen and she will no longer entertain the thought of talking with Japan. On the other hand, even if the German-Soviet war develops favorably for Germany, this conference would not necessarily bring about unfavorable results for Japan. Even if Germany's attitude toward Japan becomes cool, since there is no chance of a German conquest of the world or of a complete victory over Britain and America, there are many ways in which Japanese-German relations can be altered. Therefore, we need not feel much anxiety because of favorable developments for Germany in the German-Soviet War. On the contrary, in consideration of possibly unfavorable developments for Germany, it is of the utmost urgency that we reach an accord with America without a day's delay.

"5. But the problem is not merely to come to any agreement with America. The urgency, of course, must not force us to strike a submissive attitude. In other words, we shall do everything that can be done, and then if success is not attained, there is no help for it. It is my opinion that to do everything that should be done is absolutely essential from a diplomatic as well as from a domestic standpoint."

Both the War and Navy Ministers listened to me intently. Neither could give me an immediate reply but before the day was over the Navy expressed complete accord and, moreover, anticipated the success of the conference. The War Minister's reply came in writing as follows:

"If the Prime Minister were to personally meet with the President of the United States, the existing diplomatic relations of the Empire, which are based on the Tripartite Pact, would unavoidably be weakened. At the same time, a considerable domestic stir would undoubtedly be created. For these reasons, the meeting is not considered a suitable move. The attempt to surmount the present critical situation by the Prime Minister's offering his personal services, is viewed with sincere respect and admiration. If, therefore, it is the Prime Minister's intention to attend such a meeting with determination to firmly support the basic principles embodied in the Empire's Revised Plan to the "N"-Plan and to carry out a war against America if the President of the United States still fails to comprehend the true intentions of the Empire even after this final effort is made, the army is not necessarily in disagreement.

"However, (1) it is not in favor of the meeting if, after making preliminary investigations it is learned that the meeting will be with someone other than the President, such as Secretary Hull or one in a lesser capacity. (2) You shall not resign your post as a result of the meeting on the grounds that it was a failure; rather, you shall be prepared to assume leadership in the war against America."

The War Minister was of the opinion that "failure of this meeting is the greater likelihood." After considering the matter from all angles, the Foreign Minister concluded that "matters should be carried out expeditiously." On the morning of the 6th, immediately after the joint conference, I was granted an audience, and I conveyed my intentions to the Emperor. During the afternoon of the 7th, I was summoned to his presence and was advised: "I am in receipt of intelligence from the Navy pertaining to a general oil embargo against Japan by America. In view of this, the meeting with the President should take place as soon as possible." Instructions were despatched to Ambassador Nomura during the morning of the 7th.