

Ryuji Hattori

War and Diplomacy in Modern Japan

Prime Minister Kōki Hirota and His
Times

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Preface

Hirota Kōki was born the eldest son of a minor Fukuoka stonemason in 1878. He had a distinguished diplomatic career, serving in numerous foreign ministry posts including as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau and as ambassador to the Soviet Union. Named foreign minister during the Saitō Makoto government, he inherited the difficult situation posed by the Japan's departure from the League of Nations in 1933 and the aftermath of the 1931 Manchurian Incident. He would continue on as foreign minister in the subsequent Okada Keisuke government and devote himself to improving relations with China and other countries. Then, following the February 26 Incident, he became prime minister.

When the overwhelmingly popular Konoe Fumimaro formed a government in 1937, Hirota returned to the post of foreign minister. This was shortly followed by the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He was later one of the senior statesmen who approved the formation of the Tōjō Hideki government and engaged in failed efforts towards the Soviets intended to end World War II. He was convicted of Class A war crimes at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo Trials) after the war and became the only civilian official to be sentenced to death by hanging.

Hirota thus served as foreign minister during two difficult periods for Japanese diplomacy: from 1933 to 1936, following the country's departure from the League of Nations; and from 1937 to 1938, the first months of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In total, he served as foreign minister for forty-two months; three and a half years. That makes him the longest serving Japanese foreign minister of the 1930s, with the second longest – Arita Hachirō – having served for only twenty-six months.

In between his two terms as foreign minister, he also served as prime minister for the ten and a half months following the February 26 Incident. As such, he continuously served in the cabinet for nearly five years beginning in the fall of 1933 with the exception for the four months of the Hayashi Senjūrō government. Having risen to the post of prime minister and spent a third of the decade overseeing Japan's precarious foreign relations as foreign minister, Hirota embodies the Japanese diplomacy of the 1930s.

Today, nearly eighty years after the Tokyo Trials, Hirota is best known in Japan as the only civilian official to have been executed. The panel of judges sentenced to him to death by hanging by a margin of just one vote. His execution was unexpected and continues to serve as a source of criticism for the trials in Japan.

As these considerations make clear, discussing the controversial Japanese diplomacy of the 1930s or the Tokyo Trials without addressing Hirota would be impossible. Providing a full appraisal of Hirota has often proved elusive in the past, but this book hopes to pin down the true picture of the man by following the course of his life.¹

Hachioji, Japan

Ryuji Hattori

¹ Since the publication of this work's Japanese edition in 2008, several significant biographical studies of modern Japanese diplomats have been published as follows: Rustin B. Gates, "Pan-Asianism in Prewar Japanese Foreign Affairs: The Curious Case of Uchida Yasuya," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 37, No. 1 (November 2011): 1–27; Peter Mauch, *Sailor Diplomat: Nomura Kichisaburō and the Japanese-American War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); Inoue Toshikazu, *Hirota Kōki: Tūne ni Heiwa Shūgisha Datta* [Hirota Kōki: A Pacifist by Nature] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2021); Kumamoto Fumio, *Shidehara Kijūrō* (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2021); Taneine Shūji, *Shidehara Kijūrō* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2021); Yanagihara Masaharu, *Teikoku Nihon to Fusen Jōyaku: Gaikōkan ga Mita Kokusaihō no Genkai to Kibou* [Imperial Japan and the Kellogg-Briand Pact: The Limits and Hopes of International Law as Seen by a Diplomat] (Tokyo: NHK Publishing, 2022); Watanabe Kōta, *Ishii Kikujirō: Sensō no Jidai wo Kakenuketa Gaikōkan no Shōgai* [Ishii Kikujirō: The Life of a Diplomat Who Lived through the Era of War] (Tokyo: Yoshida Shoten, 2023). While these studies offer significant contributions and valuable insights, a fundamental revision of this work was not deemed necessary. For additional recent scholarship, see also Hattori Ryūji, translated by Graham B. Leonard, *Japanese Diplomacy and East Asian International Politics, 1918–1931* (London: Routledge, 2024), vii–xi.

Usage Notes

- Japanese names are listed family name first
- With the exception of Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen, Chinese names are romanized using Hanyu Pinyin

Contents

1 Introduction—Two Sides	1
Foreign Policy	1
Four Tasks	2
“Sino-Japanese Partnership” and Populism	4
References	6
2 From Fukuoka to Kasumigaseki—Hirota’s Youth	7
Eldest Son of a Stonemason	7
Two Biographies	8
Shūyūkan and the Gen’yōsha	9
The Triple Intervention	10
Tokyo	11
The Kōkōkyo	12
Joining the Foreign Ministry	13
References	15
3 Between China and the West—Beijing, Washington, Moscow	17
Learning from Yamaza—Assistant Diplomat	17
Focusing on China—Beijing and London	18
Discussing Politics—1st Section of the Commercial Affairs Bureau	19
The First World War	20
Estrangement from the Shidehara Faction—at the Japanese Embassy to the US	22
The Western and Reformist Factions—2nd Section Director of the Information Department	23
Establishing Relations with the Soviet Union—Director of the European and American Affairs Bureau	26
“The Character of a Politician”	28

Minister to the Netherlands	29
First International Conference	30
Ambassador to the Soviet Union	31
The Manchurian Incident	33
Manchukuo and the Lytton Commission	34
Hirota's View of the Soviet Union	36
References	40
4 Straying from the Ideals of China Policy—Foreign Minister and Harmony Diplomacy	43
Appointment as Foreign Minister	43
Pan-Asianist Tendencies	44
Hirota's Conditions for Joining the Cabinet	45
Five-Minister Conference	47
Hirota's Foreign Policy Vision—Harmony Diplomacy and “Mutual Assistance and Amity”	48
Hirota's First Mistake: The Amō Statement	51
The Reality of the Amō Statement	52
What the Amō Statement Revealed	53
The Okada Government—Negotiations with Britain, the United States, and the USSR	54
“There Will Absolutely Not Be a War While I Am in Office.”	56
China's Pro-Japanese Faction and “Sino-Japanese Partnership”	57
Hirota's Diplomatic Style	58
The Pinnacle of Hirota Diplomacy—Establishing Embassies	59
The Army Backlash—The North China Separation Strategy	60
Hirota's Three Principles and the Disillusionment of the Pro-Japanese Chinese	62
Compromising with the Military	64
The Transformation of Hirota Diplomacy—The 2nd North China Separation Strategy	66
Sino-Japanese Partnership at an Impasse	68
Source Acronyms	69
References	73
5 Ten Months as Prime Minister—Conflict with the Army	77
The February 26 Incident	77
The Imperial Mandate	78
Choosing Hirota	79
Why Did Hirota Accept?	80
Army Interference in the Formation of the Hirota Government	82

Formation of the Hirota Government	83
First Cabinet Meeting	84
Two Goals	86
Restoration of the Active-Duty Officer Requirement	88
Why Hirota Agreed	89
A Dim View of China	90
The “Fundamentals of National Policy”—Expanding Both North and South	91
Difficulties Managing Sino-Japanese Relations	93
The Seven Cardinal Policies and Hirota’s Vision for “Unified Command”	94
The Intentions Behind the Anti-Comintern Pact	95
The “Hara-Kiri Exchange”	97
Resignation	98
Source Acronyms	100
References	103
6 “We Will Not Deal with the Nationalist Government”—Foreign Minister During the Second Sino-Japanese War	105
The Hayashi Government and the Failed Formation of the Ugaki Government	105
Formation of the Konoe Government and Appointment as Foreign Minister	106
A Cool Reception for Hirota	108
The Marco Polo Bridge Incident	109
Konoe’s “Initiative Theory”	110
Disappointment of Hirota’s Subordinates	111
“Hirota Is Rather Weak”	113
Excessive Peace Terms	114
Ineffective Propaganda	116
The Brussels Conference and Trautmann Mediation	117
Shidehara’s Concerns	118
Additional Peace Conditions	119
A Different Face Shown to Britain and America	121
The Fall of Nanjing and the Four Peace Conditions	121
Hirota’s True Intentions	123
The Nanjing Massacre—“Criminal Negligence” by Hirota?	124
Ending the Trautmann Mediation	125
The First Konoe Statement	126
“Partnering” with Puppet Governments	128
Hirota’s Poor Reputation	130
Diplomacy and Populism	131
References	136

7	The Collapse of Imperial Japan—Senior Statesman	139
	From the Konoe to the Hiranuma Governments	139
	From the Abe to the Yonai Governments	140
	Criticism of the Tripartite Pact During the 2nd Konoe Government	142
	The 3rd Konoe Government and the Senior Statesmen Conference	143
	The Tōjō Government and US-Japan Negotiations	144
	War with the United States	146
	Deteriorating Military Situation	147
	The Koiso Government and an Envoy to the Soviets	149
	Audience with the Emperor	150
	Approaching the Soviet Ambassador	151
	Surrender	154
	References	156
8	The Tokyo Trails—An “Active Follower”	159
	Suspicion of War Crimes	159
	Questioning by the International Prosecution Service	160
	“Isn’t It Tantamount to a Declaration of War on China?”	161
	“An Active Follower”	162
	Beginning of the Trial	163
	The Prosecution’s Case and the Defense Rebuttal	164
	Defense Strategy	165
	Using the Army’s “Demands” as a Defense	166
	Individual Defenses	168
	Witness Testimony	168
	“Don’t Submit the Materials to the Court”	169
	Counterproductive Subordinate Testimony	171
	References	174
9	Conclusion—Departure	175
	Hirota and Tōgō	175
	Verdicts	176
	“Criminal Negligence”—Death by Hanging	177
	Six to Five	179
	Bidding Farewell to His Family	180
	“Sacrifice Their Lives to Preserve Their Virtue”	181
	The Fate of the “Sino-Japanese Partnership”	182
	References	185
	Afterword	187

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Ryuji Hattori received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Kobe University in 1999. He also holds an M.A. in Human Security from the University of Tokyo, an M.A. in International Relations from Johns Hopkins University, and a Bachelor in Law from Kyoto University.

Acronyms

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CER	Chinese Eastern Railway
IPS	International Prosecution Service
IRAA	Imperial Rule Assistance Association
KMT	Kuomintang
NJA	New Japan Alliance (Shin Nippon Dōmei)
SCAP	Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers

Source Acronyms

JDR	Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., <i>Nihon Gaikō Bunsho</i> [Japanese Diplomatic Records] (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1975–1992)
MOFA	Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo
NDL	National Diet Library Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Major Figures in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1920s)	25
Table 3.2	Major Ambassadorial Postings (1920s)	26
Table 4.1	Hirota's three principles	63
Table 6.1	Japan's four conditions for peace	122

Chapter 1

Introduction—Two Sides



Abstract The introduction opens with a brief overview of Japanese foreign policy in the early twentieth century and the balance between Japan’s determination to expand within the Asian mainland and its need to maintain a cooperative framework with the Western powers. It then proceeds to lay out the four goals of the book: providing an accurate portrayal of the life of Hirota Kōki by moving beyond the popular image of the “tragic prime minister” that is commonly held in Japan due to popular media accounts; placing Hirota’s life and career within the overall context of greater trends in Japanese foreign policy; examining the Japanese foreign policy of the 1930s; and discussing the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo Trials) and the reasons that Hirota was sentenced to death. The chapter closes with a discussion of some of the ways in which the study of Hirota’s life has modern significance. Namely, by providing a cautionary tale as to the pitfalls he experienced as he tried and failed to achieve a “Sino-Japanese partnership” and how Japan’s descent into populism in the 1930s underlines the need to maintain a separation between foreign policy and domestic political pressures.

Foreign Policy

Before discussing Hirota Kōki, I would first like to provide an overview of the Japanese diplomacy of the eras in which he lived.

Traditionally, Japanese foreign policy was driven by a strong determination to expand to the Asian mainland. While the Triple Intervention had forced Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula to China following the First Sino-Japanese War, it managed to secure a foothold in Manchuria in the Russo-Japanese War. This was then followed by the annexation of Korea. This element of Japanese policy—one that would ultimately result in the Second Sino-Japanese War a few years after the Manchurian Incident—is referred to as the country’s “continental policy” (*tairiku seisaku*).

Nevertheless, prewar Japanese diplomacy was not so unilinear as to be understandable from continental policy alone.

Japan's strength in the Meiji Period (1868–1912) was limited, and it needed to bring about revision of the unequal treaties that the Western powers had forced upon it before it could hope to expand. This led to Japan making its relations with the United Kingdom and the United States into the cornerstone of its foreign policy, a focus best symbolized by the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Modern Japanese diplomacy faced the challenge of somehow securing expansion on the Asian mainland and preventing Russian moves south while also operating under a cooperative framework with Britain and America. This meant that Japanese continental policy was restrained by this need to cooperate with the powers.

This delicate balance between continental policy and cooperation with the West was disrupted by the First World War, however, as the powers' attention was drawn to Europe. Japan entered the war (nominally due to its obligations under the Anglo-Japanese Alliance) and then forced the Twenty-One Demands upon China as a means of maintaining and expanding its continental interests.

But when the war ended, Japan returned to its policy of cooperating with Britain and America and once again sought to secure continental expansion from within the framework of that cooperation. It became overly committed to its continental interests in the wake of the Manchurian Incident, however, upsetting this balance and ultimately leading to the destruction of the Japanese Empire through the Pacific and Second Sino-Japanese Wars. The 1930s—the era in which Hirota Kōki served as foreign and prime minister—proved to be a time of great challenges for Japan.

Four Tasks

This book seeks to carry out four tasks through its discussion of Hirota.

The first, naturally, is providing a portrayal of Hirota's life.

Gaining a firm grasp on Hirota has often proved elusive in the past, however. The general image of Hirota is that of a selfless figure, a talented man who, ultimately unable to hold back the military, put forward no defense at the Tokyo Trials and accepted his sentence. This portrayal, drawn from popular works such as Shiroshima Saburō's bestselling 1974 novel *The Setting Sun Burns*, meshes well with his background as an elite diplomat who graduated from Tokyo Imperial University. But while this portrayal of Hirota as a "tragic prime minister" holds some truth, it is insufficient to fully capture his character.

There was another side to Hirota, that of the patriot. It had been the shock of the Triple Intervention that had motivated him to become a diplomat in the first place, and by the time he had risen to the middle ranks of the foreign ministry, he displayed an interest in domestic affairs and enjoyed discussing politics. Diplomats generally tried to maintain a distance from domestic politics, but Hirota bucked this trend. By the time he was serving as First Secretary at the Japanese embassy in Washington, he had become popular among younger foreign ministry officials. And after his appointment as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau, he often interacted with politicians, businessmen, and civilian nationalists. His future showed great promise.

Hirota was also deeply involved with the Gen'yōsha, a nationalist organization based in his hometown of Fukuoka. He was a nationalist, but one who was a political actor. There were two sides to him: that of the elite diplomat and that of the politician.

The question of Hirota's affiliation with the Gen'yōsha is one of particular importance, but it is not without controversy. The first authoritative biography of Hirota stated that "while there is no question that Hirota was familiar with the Gen'yōsha from early on in his life and drew upon its beliefs, he was never a formal member of the organization."¹ Shiroyama's novel—which was based on this biography—repeated this assertion that "Hirota was not a formal member of the Gen'yōsha."²

Research into the Tokyo Trials has shown that these sorts of statements are contrary to the facts, however.³ Hirota was indeed a member of the Gen'yōsha. Using sources including *Gen'yō*, the periodical of the Gen'yōsha Memorial Hall, I will attempt in the book to provide a full-sized portrayal of Hirota by exploring his true nature as a "politician-diplomat."

The book's second task is placing Hirota within the greater context of Japanese diplomacy.

Hirota may be the protagonist of this book, but looking at him alone is insufficient for understanding him. Tracing the policy trends and personal relationships within the foreign ministry will help bring his position to the fore. More specifically, the book will look at Hirota's relationships with his mentors Komura Jutarō and Yamaza Enjirō; with the foreign ministry mainstream of Shidehara Kijūrō, Saburi Sadao, and Debuchi Katsuji; with the more senior Satō Naotake; with his contemporary Yoshida Shigeru; and with Arita Hachirō and Shigemitsu Mamoru, his subordinates belonging to the reformist faction. Rather than merely focusing on the much-discussed divide between the foreign ministry and the military, I would like to delve deeper into the foreign ministry itself in discussing Hirota.

The third task is exploring the Japanese diplomacy of the 1930s.

Hirota first became foreign minister in 1933, in the wake of Japan's departure from the League of Nations. At that time, he envisioned the creation of a regional order in East Asia based on "Sino-Manchukuoan-Japanese" cooperation and accordingly worked to have the Soviet Union, Germany, and the Nationalist government in Nanjing grant de facto recognition to Japan's puppet state of Manchukuo. But he did not devote himself entirely to Pan-Asianism; he also strove to improve Japan's relations with the Western powers. Hirota rejoined the cabinet as foreign minister in the 1st Konoe government shortly prior to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War but departed the foreign ministry after his attempts at dealing with China failed. It has to be acknowledged that it was not just the army and navy that fed Japan's drive toward the Asian mainland; the foreign ministry that Hirota led also played a role.

The fourth task is examining the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the "Tokyo Trials."

The popular conception is of Hirota stoically accepting being sentenced to death in silence, unreasonable though it was. And it is certainly true that he died without ever having taken the stand in his own defense. But this book hopes to paint a wider

picture of Hirota by showing his conflicts with his defense team and his own wavering psychology through use of the recently discovered defense team materials.

As is already known, Hirota spoke frankly when questioned by the International Prosecution Section, even more prolifically than the other defendants. While the records of these interrogations naturally need to be viewed through a critical lens when using them as a historical source, they also provide glimpses of Hirota's perception of the contemporary situation, his visions for foreign affairs, and his sense of responsibility for the war.

“Sino-Japanese Partnership” and Populism

It would be no exaggeration to say that the question of how to appraise the Japanese foreign policy of the 1930s and the Tokyo Trials can largely come down to how one views Hirota. Even so, I imagine that there are readers who wonder why someone would want to trace the life of a diplomat who was executed nearly eight years ago. I would therefore like to raise two areas where Hirota has modern significance.

The first of these concerns the outcome of the “Sino-Japanese partnership” that Hirota had envisioned. How did he come to advocate for this partnership, and why did it end in utter failure rather than the cooperation that he had desired? Or, to put it another way, how did Pan-Asianism and regionalism take root in Japanese foreign policy, and what were the problems inherent to these ideologies?

Pan-Asianism argued that Japan should act as part of Asia rather than aspire to be like the West. And China was seen as the leading example of an Asian country that could potentially become a partner for Japan. It was during the era of Hirota Diplomacy that arguments for a Sino-Japanese partnership became prominent in Japan.

Both before and following the First World War, cooperation with America and Britain had served as the cornerstone for Japanese foreign policy. The Pan-Asianism that arose in the 1930s and 1940s was a divergence from the country's traditional diplomacy. Through the 1920s, the foreign ministry had been dominated by a Western faction that emphasized collaboration with America and Britain. It was a different group, known as the Asian or reform faction, who would take the central place in the ministry in the wake of the Manchurian Incident.

Hirota served in a diverse series of posts in countries such as China, Britain, America, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union prior to being named foreign minister. He was a member of the Western faction but began to favor the reformist advocacy for a Sino-Japanese partnership shortly after becoming foreign minister. Hirota had long seen Japan's relations with China and Russia as indicative of its future prospects.

And yet, no Sino-Japanese partnership came about during Hirota's time as foreign minister, to put it lightly. Instead, it was while he was serving as foreign minister that Japan went to war with China, and Hirota himself was involved in Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro's public announcement that he would no longer negotiate with

the Nationalist government. The path followed by Hirota is representative of that of Japanese foreign policy as a whole and is significant when considering Sino-Japanese cooperation and Pan-Asianism today as well.

The second point where Hirota has modern significance is in the examination of the nature of foreign policy and domestic politics.

What lessons did Japan learn from its unprecedented defeat and the high costs incurred? I believe that we can extract some norms from the course that led to this catastrophe. As part of doing so, I would like to consider the relationship between foreign policy and populism. Populism is a political approach that involves pandering to the masses; it can easily devolve into mob rule and xenophobia in its desire to appeal to popular opinion.

The 1930s, the decade in which Hirota served as foreign and prime minister, was an era of militarism for Japan, and there is no question that its foreign policy was severely restricted by the military.

But it cannot be forgotten that Japan's military expansion into Asia was cheered on by its population and mass media, and that Japanese foreign policy was also in part overseen by politicians like Konoe Fumimaro who enjoyed wide popular support. This was the domestic environment that influenced Hirota's foreign policy while he was in office.

Particularly during his second term as foreign minister, when he was serving in the Konoe government, foreign policy was carried out in a populist atmosphere that sought to accommodate not just the military but also the public. The military was not the only force restraining Hirota's diplomacy; it was his inability to maintain a distance from Konoe's populism that rendered it untenable. And the need to maintain a distance between foreign policy and domestic popular opinion is as true today as it was then.

To follow Hirota's life is to reexamine the Tokyo Trials and the Japanese foreign policy of the 1930s and to consider the nature of diplomatic leadership and the meaning of Sino-Japanese cooperation.

Notes

1. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 10.
2. Shiroyama Saburō, *Rakujitsu Moyu* [The Setting Sun Burns], (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1986), 287. A similar statement can be found at Kitagawa Kōji, *Damashite Yukamu Hirota Kōki no Shōgai* [Walk in Silence: The Life of Hirota Kōki], (Tokyo: Kōdansha Bunko, 1987), 10. An English translation of Shiroyama's novel was published under the title of *War Criminal: The Life and Death of Hirota Koki* in 1977.
3. Awaya Kentarō, *Tōkyō Saiban e no Michi* [The Road to the Tokyo Trials], (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2006), 161–72.

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- Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed. 1992. *Hirota Kōki*. Fukuoka: Ashishobō.
- Shiroyama Saburō. 1986. *Rakujitsu Moyu* [The Setting Sun Burns]. Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko.

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Chapter 2

From Fukuoka to Kasumigaseki—Hirota’s Youth



Abstract The second chapter is devoted to Hirota’s life prior to his entrance to the Japanese foreign ministry in 1906. He was born the son of a stonemason of relatively modest means but was able to secure entry to the Shūyūkan, a prominent local school, and then the First High School in Tokyo, the most competitive high school in the country. Central to Hirota’s upbringing and the development of his political beliefs was the Gen’yōsha, a nationalist organization headquartered near his childhood home in Fukuoka noted for its Pan-Asianist leanings. Hirota’s connections with the Gen’yōsha would provide him with financial assistance for his studies during this period as well as introductions to influential figures within the foreign ministry. Hirota would remain affiliated with the Gen’yōsha for the rest of his life, and this would be one factor behind his arrest following the Second World War.

Eldest Son of a Stonemason

Hirota Kōki, the man who would go on to become the 32nd prime minister of Japan, was born on February 14, 1878 in Kajimachi, Fukuoka. Kajimachi had flourished as a castle town in the Edo Period (1603–1868) and was the location of Suikyō Tenmangū shrine. Today, it is the Tenjin neighborhood of Fukuoka, which takes its name from that shrine’s patron kami. With numerous government offices and department stores, it can be regarded as the city’s downtown. It was originally known for its numerous smiths, however, from which its original name—literally “smith town”—was derived.

During the Meiji Period (1868–1912), Hirota’s father Tokubei operated Hirotoku, a stone dealership, with the assistance of his wife Take. Hirota was originally given the name Jōtarō. Meaning “healthy son,” the name reflected his parents’ earnest desire that their firstborn child grow up to be strong and healthy.

As the years passed, Jōtarō was followed by Hatsu, Shintarō, and Tokuemon, and the Hirota household became a lively one. Blessed with numerous children, Tokubei and Take worked hard. The sharp sounds of the mason’s hammer constantly rang from Hirotoku, and the couple gained the local nickname of “thirty-five days” from their apparent ability to squeeze thirty-five days of work out of a month. While the

hard-working and conscientious Tokubei immediately gained a good reputation for his stone, his business was still young, and he struggled to make ends meet.

Despite his young age, Jōtarō was aware of the family's financial difficulties and traveled through the town peddling mat rushes and pine needles. The filial young man thus helped his parents and used what spare money he had to buy brushes and paper.

This was not enough to allow him to buy his own textbooks, however, so he would borrow them from his friends and copy their contents. Studying hard despite the adversity, Jōtarō received outstanding grades from early on and also became extremely skilled at calligraphy, having studied under the calligrapher Takatsu Takendo. This led to his father using his calligraphy when carving stone.¹

Two Biographies

The calligraphic skill of the future Hirota Kōki is discussed in Shiroyama's novel *The Setting Sun Burns*. He describes how the calligraphy of this "unknown elementary schooler" was chosen for the nameplate of the southern torii gate of Suikyō Tenmangū shrine and how "this would go on to serve as a turning point in Hirota's life."

This passage is based on an earlier biography of Hirota, but it does not seem to actually be true. Hirota's eldest son Hiroo has stated that his father's calligraphy was featured not on the torii nameplate but rather on a stone pillar in front of the shrine. Additionally, the pillar in question was erected in November 1895, in celebration of Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War, when Hirota was seventeen and in middle school, not elementary school.²

There are also doubts about whether the Hirota family was actually as impoverished as is commonly believed. Discussion of the family's poverty can only be traced back as far as two 1936 biographies of Hirota written by Sawada Ken and Iwasaki Sakae.

These biographies were released while Hirota was prime minister and are quite hagiographical in nature, perhaps to heighten expectations for his time in office. As his rise to the position of prime minister in the wake of the February 26 Incident had been quite unexpected, the books would have had to be written in haste to meet the sudden demand. But whatever their origins, they have had a great influence on later biographies (and, in turn, on Shiroyama's novel), leading to the impoverished background theory becoming entrenched.³

Another reason to question the family's poverty is that Hirota's father seems to have donated the gravestone for Kurushima Tsuneki, a member of the Gen'yōsha, a nationalist organization based in Fukuoka. Angered by Foreign Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu's plans for revision of the unequal treaties, Kurushima attempted to assassinate him on October 18, 1889 with a bomb (Ōkuma would survive but lose a leg). Afterwards, Kurushima committed suicide with a dagger. Tokubei personally donated a fine gravestone for his funeral.

If this is true, it would mean at the very least that the Hirota family was not extremely impoverished. It also means that the previously mentioned anecdotes of Hirota's youth should also be viewed with some skepticism. Additionally, there are statements from relatives that the Hirota family was not that poor. Beyond questions of the Hirota family's finances, however, Tokubei's involvement with Kurushima's funeral is also quite interesting as it speaks to connections between the Hirota family and the Gen'yōsha.⁴

Shūyūkan and the Gen'yōsha

After graduating from Hashiguchi Daimyō Ordinary Elementary School and Higher Elementary School, Hirota went through the preparatory course at Shūyūkan Middle School before being accepted by the school as a second-year student in September 1894. Shūyūkan had been established in the Edo Period as the domain school for Fukuoka domain. Its education was originally Confucian in nature, but by the time Hirota entered, it emphasized the importance of English.

It was at Shūyūkan that Hirota met and became close friends with Hirata Tomoo, a classmate. Hirata was tall and dark skinned with large eyes that were always shining. He had a deep voice and an easygoing personality, and he and Hirota both became close to the older members of the Gen'yōsha. The two young men would end up joining the foreign ministry in the same year.⁵

Hirota and Hirata were not the only prominent graduates of Shūyūkan. Others included the diplomats Morishima Gorō and Hidaka Shinrokurō, journalists Ogata Taketora and Ryūshin Tarō, politician Nakano Seigō, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Tanaka Kōtarō. One of the drafters of the Meiji Constitution, Kaneko Kentarō, also studied at Shūyūkan during its previous incarnation as a domain school.

Reflecting on his time at the school, Hirota wrote that:

I had seven or eight friends at Shūyūkan who shared my ideals. We were always on the lookout for books with which to cultivate our spirits, and we would take turns reading them when we found one. This experience made a lasting impression on me. We were at the height of our desire for knowledge, but we did not forget to train our spirits and nurture our ideas as well. We intended to fully realize Shūyūkan's motto of being "honest and strong."⁶

The Analects had been a favorite book of Hirota's from an early age, but he did not neglect his body; he also frequented his neighborhood's judo dojo. When a new dojo building was constructed, he was chosen to represent the students at the dedication ceremony.

This dojo—named the Meidōkan—was located on the premises of the Gen'yōsha and was operated by the organization for the purpose of developing the local youth. The funds for the dojo had been provided by Gen'yōsha's first president, Hiraoka Kōtarō. Hirota specialized in hip throws and, while not particularly tall, grew into a sturdy young man. His time at the dojo brought him into contact with the Gen'yōsha's ideas and also inspired him to try to master Zen.⁷

The Gen'yōsha was a significant influence on Hirota as he grew up, but what was this organization? It was originally founded in 1881 by former samurai of Fukuoka domain who were disgruntled with the Meiji government and, as was mentioned earlier, one member—Kurushima Tsuneki—had attempted to assassinate Foreign Minister Ōkuma with a bomb in 1889 (Hirota would later marry Shizuko, the daughter of Tsukinari Kōtarō, one of Kurushima's comrades in the organization). The Gen'yōsha was dissolved by the Occupation authorities following the Second World War, and today only an unobtrusive monument marks its former location.

The Gen'yōsha can be considered a pioneer of the Japanese right wing. It held some Pan-Asianist beliefs and offered support to Chinese revolutionaries like Sun Yat-sen in the final years of the Qing Dynasty. Its name was derived from the Genkai Sea, the body of water separating Fukuoka from the Asian mainland. Hirota would become a formal member of the organization.⁸

The Triple Intervention

After finishing his daily training at the dojo, Hirota would visit the Gen'yōsha and listen to stories of the heroic exploits of the group's older members. He would then return home at eight o'clock (less than a ten-minute walk) and study intensely. He had outstanding grades and hoped to gain admission to the Imperial Japanese Army Academy so as not to burden his family financially.

It was as Hirota was devoting himself to judo and study that two events occurred that would serve as a turning point in his life: the First Sino-Japanese War and the Triple Intervention. After Japan's victory in that war, a peace conference was held in Shimonoseki (not far from Fukuoka) in March 1895. Under the terms of the treaty concluded the following month, China ceded Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan. In what became known as the Triple Intervention, Russia, Germany, and France responded to the treaty by immediately intervening and forcing Japan to return to the peninsula.

Hirota had intended to join the army, but these events convinced him that Japan's military strength was all for naught if unaccompanied by diplomatic strength. Setting his sights on the foreign ministry rather than the army academy, he resolved at the age of seventeen to "become a diplomat and devote myself to Japan's future."

This change in plans brought with it financial concerns, however. Becoming a diplomat would mean going to high school and then graduating from an imperial university. He had his heart set on attending the First High School in Tokyo and was able to arrange to have Hiraoka Kōtarō, the first president of the Gen'yōsha, finance not just his studies but those of his closest friend Hirata as well. He also consulted with Shintō Kiheita, president of the Gen'yōsha, and was provided with an introduction to Tōyama Mitsuru. Tōyama in turn would introduce him to Yamaza Enjirō at the foreign ministry.⁹ The reports that Hirota sent back to Shintō on his activities in Tokyo can still be found at the Gen'yōsha Memorial Hall in Fukuoka.

Hirota graduated from Shūyūkan in April 1898 at the age of twenty. It was at this point that he changed his name from Jōtarō to Kōki. This name was derived from a line in *The Analects*: “a gentleman must be strong and resolute.”

Tokyo

Hirota headed to Tokyo in May to take the entrance examination for the First High School, which he and Hirata passed. He was unfamiliar with the city, but his Gen'yōsha connections continued to prove useful. As mentioned above, his trip was being financed by Hiraoka, and he and Hirata visited Tōyama Mitsuru, one of the organization's founders, while in the city.

Tōyama provided support for numerous Asian politicians in exile including Kim Ok-gyun, Sun Yat-sen, and Rash Behari Bose, and Hirota would give the following tribute to Tōyama during the Pacific War:

Truly, he was a man who accomplished his goals for the advancement of Asia without venturing out into the world himself. It is no wonder that patriots seeking to free themselves from the shackles of Britain and America, men from places like the Republic of China, the Philippines, and India, always approached him as a compassionate father, a savior.¹⁰

After Hirota said that he was interested in becoming a diplomat, Tōyama introduced him to Yamaza Enjirō, a fellow Fukuoka native who had had a sterling career at the foreign ministry. When Hirota visited Yamaza, he enthusiastically explained that “China and Russia absolutely must be the center of our foreign policy. If you wish to be a diplomat, you must first exhaustively study the state of affairs in those countries.” Coming from such an established diplomat, these words made a profound impression on Hirota, who later wrote that “throughout my years at school, I would frequently visit [Yamaza's] home and learn from him.”¹¹

Tōyama also introduced Hirota to Sugiyama Shigemaru. While Sugiyama (who was also from Fukuoka, naturally) was not a formal member of the Gen'yōsha, he was a confidante of Tōyama who worked behind the scenes as a political fixer, a sort of “ronin” for the right-wing. Hirota remarked during his first term as foreign minister that “Tōyama-sensei introduced me to Sugiyama-sensei at a time when I was having severe difficulties with my studies, and I have learned much from him ever since.”¹²

While in Tokyo, Hirota joined the Kōdōkan, a prominent judo dojo. He was introduced to the dojo by Uchida Ryōhei, yet another Fukuoka native affiliated with the Gen'yōsha. As he did not have a seal with him upon his visit to the dojo, he instead used a bloody fingerprint to join. He had reached the rank of 1st dan in judo by this point and sought to master *tomoe-nage* and *seoi-nage* (two types of throws) there.

At 163 cm in height and 64 kg in weight, Hirota was of a typical build for the time and performed very successfully in a judo competition against the Second High

School in Sendai. During his second term as foreign minister, he would be awarded the rank of 5th dan by the Kōdōkan.¹³

The Kōkōkyo

While at the First High School, Hirota lived with five other graduates of Shūyūkan in a small house in Koishikawa Ward (including Hirata). The small house had three rooms: a two-mat room (3.3 m²), a four and a half-mat room (7.4 m²), and a six-mat room (9.9 m²). As the four and a half-mat room was used by the maid, four of the six (including Hirota and Hirata) squeezed into the six-mat room. They named the building the “Kōkōkyo” after a medieval Chinese song.

Hirota later described how this living arrangement came to be:

After travelling from our hometown of Fukuoka to Tokyo for higher education, we found the Tokyo of the day to be remarkably inconvenient. Being from the countryside, things there just did not feel right to us. [...] Talking things over with the now-deceased Hirata Tomoo, we decided that living together would allow us to happily study and improve ourselves. After gaining the approval of our seniors [in Fukuoka], we established the Kōkōkyo.

The students had former foreign minister Soejima Taneomi (who they had been introduced to by Tōyama) write the nameplate for the house. Yamaza also contributed a piece of calligraphy in which he had written “constant fidelity.” These can still be seen at the Kōkōkyo’s current location in Sugunami Ward. Soejima was famous for his calligraphic skill, but seeing them in person, it was Yamaza’s calligraphy that struck me as truly magnificent.

In his pursuit of becoming a diplomat, Hirota got up at six o’clock every morning to look through the newspapers (including foreign ones) and tried to go to bed at ten o’clock every night. Hirota and Hirata were very kind and became quite popular. At some point, younger students began referring to the quiet Hirota as Blue Oni (ogre) and the more passionate Hirata as Red Oni. These were stock characters in children’s stories. The students living in the Kōkōkyo helped cover their expenses through translation and writing manuscripts.¹⁴

Hirota graduated from the First High School in July 1901 and was then accepted into the political science program at Tokyo Imperial University’s College of Law. Japan and Britain entered into an alliance the following January, and Hirota and Hirata excitedly followed English-language coverage of the alliance through the university’s library. At Yamaza’s request, the students at the Kōkōkyo also published a pamphlet to help inform the public on international affairs.

The pamphlet was entitled “The Anglo-Japanese Alliance and World Opinion.” Over 115 pages in length, it introduced the reader to articles from leading Western newspapers and magazines. Hirota primarily oversaw the translation of English-language newspaper articles. The pamphlet was carried in bookstores and seems to have been widely read. A copy is held by the National Diet Library.

The pamphlet opened with a photograph of Foreign Minister Komura Jutarō and included pieces by Ōkuma Shigenobu, Yamaza Enjirō, and others. An introduction was provided by Fukuoka journalist Fukumoto Nichiman. Reading through the pamphlet provides a glimpse not only into the hopes these students had for the new alliance, but also into the personal connections that Hirota had made, largely with others from Fukuoka.¹⁵ Hirota and his friends at the Kōkōkyo also began publishing an alumni magazine for Shūyūkan around this time.¹⁶

Joining the Foreign Ministry

Japan may have entered into an alliance with Britain, but Russia's failure to withdraw its forces from Manchuria following the Boxer Rebellion led to increasing tensions between them. Yamaza, who was now director of the Political Affairs Bureau at the foreign ministry, secretly dispatched Hirota and Hirata to Manchuria and Korea respectively in the summer of 1903 to observe local conditions. This was Hirota's first time traveling overseas, and he said that "we were naturally in high spirits at the idea."

After traveling from Shimonoseki to Korea, Hirota continued traveling north, observing locations such as Lüshun, the location of a Russian naval base. He also visited Zhifu (Yantai) on the Shandong Peninsula. In the meantime, Hirata traveled to Korea on foot from Vladivostok and also visited Beijing and Hankou. The two young men were thus able to experience China shortly before the end of the Qing Dynasty.

The Russo-Japanese War broke out in February 1904, and Hirota traveled to Matsuyama, Shikoku in the summer to act as an interpreter at a POW camp there. He then reported back to Yamaza on what he had learned about the domestic situation in Russia.¹⁷

Graduating from Tokyo Imperial University in July 1905, Hirota was now ready to become a diplomat. Yet he and Hirata failed the 14th Diplomatic Officer Examination held in September, meaning that he would have to wait for at least another year to try again. He reluctantly temporarily took up a position at the Residency-General of Korea on the advice of Tsuruhara Sadakichi, who was director general there. Hirota had been introduced to Tsuruhara by Kurino Shin'ichirō of the foreign ministry (both Tsuruhara and Kurino were from Fukuoka).

Before leaving for Korea, Hirota married Tsukinari Shizuko. As touched on earlier, Shizuko was the daughter of Gen'yōsha leader Tsukinari Kōtarō. Shizuko and Kōtarō had both moved to Tokyo. Hirota had known Shizuko since his time in Fukuoka, and she took care of the Kōkōkyo. Their marriage ceremony was a frugal one, held at the Kōkōkyo with no decorations and only a few close friends in attendance.¹⁸

Hirota had been involved in other marriage talks earlier, proposed by Katō Takaaki, a former ambassador to Britain and foreign minister (as well as a future prime minister). Katō was married to the daughter of Iwasaki Yatarō, founder of the Mitsubishi zaibatsu, and was therefore also the brother-in-law of Shidehara Kijūrō,

an elite diplomat who was married to another of Iwasaki's daughters. Katō had suggested that Hirota would be a good match for marrying another young lady from the family.

Had he accepted this marriage, Hirota would have gained marriage ties to Katō and Shidehara. Connections with the Mitsubishi zaibatsu would also have meant financial security. And yet, he turned down Kato's proposal without hesitation, choosing Shizuko instead. An old Shūyūkan friend recalled:

As a fresh university graduate and promising diplomat, Hirota was visited by Katō Takaaki, an elder statesman of the diplomatic world, with an offer of marriage to a Mitsubishi daughter. His decision to refuse and marry Tsukinari Shizuko, a woman of modest means, stunned everyone. Everyone was extremely jealous.¹⁹

Hirota passed the diplomatic officer's examination in September 1906, receiving the highest score that year. Others joining the ministry this year included Hirata, Yoshida Shigeru, Mushakōji Kintomo, and Hayashi Kyūjirō. Both Hirota and Yoshida were the same age, having been born in 1878. Yamaza sent a letter to the Tsuruhara in Korea to ensure that he would allow Hirota to join the foreign ministry. With that potential hurdle out of the way, Hirota would now embark on his long-cherished dream of entering the foreign ministry.²⁰

Notes

1. Sawada Ken, *Hirota Kōki-den* [Biography of Hirota Kōki] (Tokyo: Rekidai Sōri Daijin Denki Kankōkai, 1936), 17–31; Iwasaki Sakae, *Hirota Kōki-den* [Biography of Hirota Kōki] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1936), 11–25; Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki*, (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 1–3.
2. Shiroyama Saburō, *Rakujitsu Moyu* [The Setting Sun Burns] (Tokyo: Shinchō Bunko, 1986), 11–12; Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 3–4; *Gen'yō* No. 13 (1982), 2.
3. Other biographies of Hirota include: Nagamatsu Asazō, *Shin Nihon no Kyojin o Kataru – Ningen Hirota Kōki* [Discussing the Giants of the New Japan: Hirota Kōki the Man] (Tokyo: Morita Shobō, 1936), Yoshii Takehira, *Jidō no Kan – Hirota Kōki-san* [Models for Children: Hirota Kōki] (Tokyo: Shōbunkan, 1936), Watanabe Yukio, *Shūsō no Hito – Hirota Kōki* [Man of Hardship: Hirota Kōki] (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1998). For more on Sawada's biography, see: Matsumoto Hiroyuki, "Hirota Kōki," in Mikuriya Takashi, ed., *Saishō-tachi no Dessan – Maboroshi no Denki de Yomu Nihon no Rīdā* (Tokyo: Yumani Shobō, 2007), 189–96.
4. *Gen'yō* No. 28 (1986), 1.
5. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 6. Kokuryūkai, *Tōa Senkaku Shishi Denki* (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1966), 2:724 states that Hirata "was not large in stature".
6. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, iv; Ōtsuka Satoru, ed., *Shūyūkan Monogatari* [Tales of the Shūyūkan] (Fukuoka: Shūyū Tsūshin, 1962), 1–18, 31–42, 65–67.
7. *Fukuryō Shinpō* (October 13, 1896); Ōtsuka 68–73; Shōno Hisato, ed., *Shin'ō Kikigaki* (Fukuoka: Shindō Shintarō-sensei Shūenkai, 1964), 13; Higuchi Kenkichi, "Meidōkan Sōsetsu no Koro" [During the Establishment of the Meidōkan], *Gen'yō* No. 30 (1986), 5; Takarabe Kazuo, "Hirota Kōki-sensei to Jūdō (1) – Meidōkan Sōritsu 90 Shūnen ni Sai shite" [Hirota Kōki and Judo – On the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the Meidōkan], *Gen'yō* No. 30 (1986), 2; Takarabe Kazuo, ed., *Meidōkan-shi* (Fukuoka: Meidōkan, 1984), 53–55, 62–67, 100–04, 107–12, 142, 146, 151–58, 232.

8. According to page 7 of *Gen'yō* No. 3 (1980), “as the copy of the 1935 Gen'yōsha member registry held by the Gen'yōsha Memorial Hall includes the entry ‘Hirota Kōki, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 5 Sannen-chō, Kōjimachi Ward, Tokyo,’ it is clear that he was a member of the Gen'yōsha. But it is unknown when he joined”.
9. Shintō Kazuma, “Hirota-sensei no Sugamo Jidai o Kataru” [Discussing Hirota’s Time in Sugamo], *Gen'yō* No. 17 (1983), 1.
10. Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Seiden Hensan Iinkai, ed., *Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Seiden (Miteikō)* [Authentic Biography of Tōyama Mitsuru (Unfinished)], commentary by Nishio Yōtarō (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1981), iv.
11. Hasegawa Takashi, *Yamaza Enjirō* (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshin-sha, 1967), 73–74, 153–54.
12. Fujimoto Hisanori, ed., *Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Shashin-den* [Photographic Biography of Tōyama Mitsuru] (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1988), 59, 68.
13. Maruyama Sanzō, ed., *Dai Nippon Jūdō-shi* [A History of Japanese Judo] (Tokyo: Kōdōkan, 1939), 852–56; Shintō 1; Takarabe, “Hirota Kōki-sensei to Jūdō,” 4–5.
14. Shiokawa Takao, ed., *Kōkōkyo-shi* [Kōkōkyo Magazine] (Tokyo: Kōkōkyo, 1937), 3–6, 33–37, 156, 166; Ōtsuka 74–85.
15. Hirata Tomoo, ed., *Nichiei Dōmei to Sekai no Yoron* [The Anglo-Japanese Alliance and World Opinion] (Tokyo: Genbunsha, 1902); Shiokawa 25–27; Ōtsuka 78.
16. Shūyūkan Nihyakunen-shi Henshū Iinkai, ed., *Shūyūkan Nihyakunen-shi* [A 200 Year History of the Shūyūkan] (Fukuoka: Shūyūkan 200-Nen Kinen Jigyō Iinkai, 1985), 134.
17. Hasegawa 73–76; Kokuryūkai 2:724.
18. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 46–47.
19. Ōtsuka 72–73.
20. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai 36–38, 45–47; Hasegawa 154.

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Chapter 3

Between China and the West—Beijing, Washington, Moscow



Abstract The third chapter covers Hirota's diplomatic career between his entrance to the foreign ministry in 1906 to his appointment as foreign minister in 1933, a period in which he served as minister to the Netherlands and ambassador to the Soviet Union. He also held various positions in China, the United States, and at the ministry in Tokyo. In examining his early career, the chapter focuses on the major factions within the foreign ministry of the 1920s, describing the dominant position held by Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijūrō and the rise of the Reformist (Asian) faction that would come to the fore in the 1930s. It also reviews the major aspects of Soviet-Japanese relations in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including the impact that the Manchurian Incident and creation of Manchukuo had on those relations in particular and on Japanese foreign policy as a whole. Hirota's career within the foreign ministry had only been moderately successful as of this stage in his life, partially due to disagreements with the Shidehara faction; however, it was the distance that he maintained from that faction and his successful tenure as ambassador to the USSR that would propel him to a leading role in the 1930s.

Learning from Yamaza—Assistant Diplomat

In November 1906, Hirota at last joined the foreign ministry and was named an assistant diplomat. Upon receiving his appointment, he immediately went to fellow Fukuoka native (and director of the Political Affairs Bureau) Yamaza Enjirō for advice on being a diplomat. Yamaza told him: "You must devote at least your first ten years at the ministry to learning what diplomacy is, and you must never engage in purposeless boasting or the like."

Hirota said that Yamaza "taught me that to be a diplomat for our nation, I needed to first have a full grasp on the issues affecting China and the Orient." He thus reinforced Hirota's already existing perception of China's importance. Yamaza was an important figure in the ministry during this period; after participating in the Russo-Japanese War peace talks in Portsmouth in 1905, he had accompanied Foreign Minister Komura

Jutarō to Beijing for the signing of a treaty on Manchuria. His words thus had weight behind them.¹

For his part, Komura advised younger diplomats that “a diplomat needs only his ears; he need not use his mouth. Do not speak. Listen carefully to what others say.” Komura was disliked by the press for his secrecy, but he enjoyed the confidence of Yamagata Aritomo, one of the most powerful political figures in the country.² Yamaza was widely seen as Komura’s likely successor, and Hirota was no doubt aware of this fact. It would be presumptuous to assume that Hirota fully adhered to the advice he had received from Yamaza about maintaining a low profile, however.

In addition to Yamaza, Commercial Affairs Bureau Director Ishii Kikujirō and Telegraph Section Director Shidehara Kijūrō were also seen as future leaders of the ministry. Ishii was a backer of Shidehara’s, and when he became foreign minister during the First World War, he appointed Shidehara as vice-minister. While Hirota and Shidehara were essentially of the same generation (Hirota was six years younger), the relationship between the two men would prove to be a difficult one.

Shidehara came from a wealthy farming family in Osaka and had always had a promising future. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he had also married into the Mitsubishi zaibatsu, making him the brother-in-law of Katō Takaaki. It would be Katō and Ishii who became the central figures in the foreign ministry following Komura’s death in 1911, and they brought Shidehara along with them.

Hirota, who had ties to Komura and Yamaza instead, was envious of Shidehara, the most successful of the new generation of diplomats who had entered the ministry via examinations. Working with other younger diplomats like Ariyoshi Akira, Yoshizawa Kenkichi, Matsuoka Yōsuke, Nakamura Takashi, and Honda Kumatarō, he “fostered an anti-Shidehara sentiment” in the ministry.³

Focusing on China—Beijing and London

Hirota took Yamaza’s lessons to heart and concentrated on Chinese issues. He already had a deep knowledge of the Chinese classics and, as discussed in the prior chapter, had gained experience working on the continent while in university. He received his first overseas appointment in October 1907, working at the Japanese legation in Beijing under Minister Hayashi Gonsuke and First Secretary Abe Moritarō.

These were the final years of Qing rule in China, and Hirota was not content to remain in the capital. He also traveled to Shanghai, the city where the interests of the Great Powers were most densely concentrated. His interest in southern China likely reflects the influence of the Gen’yōsha as well, as Sun Yat-sen and many of the other Chinese revolutionaries that the organization had supported came from the region. It is during this time that we can find the seeds (however small) of the vision of “Sino-Japanese partnership” that Hirota would later promote as foreign minister.

After nearly two years in China, Hirota was ordered to the center of contemporary international politics: Britain. Arriving in London in August 1909, he was named a third secretary at the Japanese embassy in December. The move to London had been

arranged by Yamaza, who was serving as counsellor at the embassy. Katō Takaaki was the serving ambassador, and Yoshizawa Kenkichi and Matsudaira Tsuneo were also working in the embassy at this time. All of these men would go on to become leading figures in the ministry.

Yamaza continued to serve as an overwhelming influence on Hirota during this time. He later recalled of this time that “I was posted to London and received guidance under Counsellor Yamaza for about three years.” Among the many things he learned from Yamaza was that diplomats should not keep a diary. “When he told me that a diplomat must not seek satisfaction by working in the public eye, that it is the duty of the diplomat to carry out work that is not spoken of, it had a profound impression on me.”⁴

Working under Ambassador Katō and Counsellor Yamaza, Hirota was involved in the revision of the Anglo-Japanese alliance and the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation. The third alliance treaty, concluded on July 13, 1911, was valid for ten years and excluded the US from its scope. Katō signed as ambassador. Hirota said of Katō that:

Katō Takaaki was a great diplomat. I was in close contact with him and came to know his personality while he was ambassador to Britain; I held his great character and diplomatic skill in high esteem.

Foreign Minister Komura stepped down in August, shortly after the Anglo-Japanese alliance was renewed, and died a mere three months later. Hirota later wrote that “Few diplomats have the strength of conviction and sense of national duty that Marquis Komura did.”⁵ With Komura’s death, Hirota’s relationship with Yamaza became all the more important.

During his three and a half years in London, Hirota took English lessons from a woman named “Miss Frye.” This woman provided English education to numerous members of the Japanese embassy staff over the years, including Yamaza, Matsudaira Tsuneo, and Shigemitsu Mamoru. She was a strict teacher and would have her students read editorials from *The Times* aloud, correcting their pronunciation as they did. Once the pronunciation practice was complete, they would discuss the content of the article. While Hirota would never feel confident with English, his dedication made a strong impression on Miss Frye.⁶

Discussing Politics—1st Section of the Commercial Affairs Bureau

Back in Japan, Hirota was appointed director of the 1st Section of the Commercial Affairs Bureau in June 1913, working under bureau director Sakata Jūjirō. The bureau was divided into two sections: the 1st Section mainly dealt with trade with Asia and fishing disputes with Russia, while the 2nd Section had jurisdiction over other regions and also oversaw immigration and passports. The Commercial Affairs Bureau was on the sidelines of the foreign ministry during this period, with the Political Affairs

Bureau serving as the center of influence. Hirota would sometimes visit that bureau to lighten the mood.

According to Horinouchi Kensuke, one of Hirota's subordinates during this period, Hirota "was interested in politics and would engage in a great deal of political discussion whenever a reporter came by." Yamaza had advised Hirota to keep his head down and study diplomacy for at least ten years, but now seven years into his career and in charge of a facet of China policy, Hirota was beginning to show the qualities of a political actor. Horinouchi would serve as director of the American Affairs Bureau and vice-minister while Hirota was foreign minister.⁷

In 1914, Yamaza (who was now serving as minister to China) asked Hirota to join him in Beijing, and Hirota welcomed the opportunity. Yamaza had been his role model since university, and it was a chance to work in China again. This was not to be, however, as Yamaza suddenly died of a heart attack in May at the young age of forty-seven. For Hirota, this was not only the loss of a man from the same hometown who he had greatly respected, but also the removal of his greatest protector at the ministry.

Hirota greatly mourned Yamaza's early death:

Yamaza Enjirō was a diplomat without comparison. It is truly regrettable that he was unable to live a full life and was not given the opportunity to fully exercise his talents. I am now keenly aware of the extraordinary efforts he made as director of the Political Affairs Bureau to assist Foreign Minister Komura in dealing with difficult situations.⁸

Hirota's dear friend Hirata was married to the sister of Yamaza's widow, and Hirota convinced the widow to take an adoptive heir after Yamaza's death. This speaks to how close the bond between Hirota, Yamaza, and Hirata had been.⁹

With Yamaza gone, Hirota remained at the Commercial Affairs Bureau. Hirota, Yoshida Shigeru, and Ōta Tamekichi had been known in the ministry as "Yamaza's three pupils." "After Yamaza's death, I resolved to do everything personally, without relying on anyone else."¹⁰

The First World War

After the First World War broke out in July 1914, Japan declared war on Germany on the basis of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Katō, now foreign minister in the Ōkuma government, was the driving force behind this move, which he saw as a way of acquiring Germany's rights on the Shandong Peninsula. He also intended to reinforce the Japanese privileges in Manchuria that had been obtained through the Russo-Japanese War. It would be Katō who would impose the infamous Twenty-One Demands on China.

Hirota later wrote of the Twenty-One Demands that:

Foreign Minister Katō's only intention was to extend Japan's lease on the Kwantung Leased Territory, something that he had been waiting for an opportunity to do. But [Political Affairs] Bureau Director Koike [Chōzō] added the military's demands to the Twenty-One Demands.

The result was the inclusion of a number of more ambitious items that made it into a much more serious matter.¹¹

He thus asserted that it had been pressure from the military that had led to excessive demands and that the foreign ministry had only had its sights set on Japan's rights in Manchuria.

As the Demands were being formulated, Hirota advised Katō to include a clause concerning the dredging of the Yellow River. This clause would assist China by providing flood control while also granting Japan navigation rights to the river. This would have been to both countries' benefit, but it was not incorporated into the Demands. In May 1915, the Ōkuma government forced China to accept its major demands by issuing an ultimatum.¹² The Demands were a stain on Katō reputation, and he would be replaced as foreign minister by Ishii Kikujirō in October (as mentioned earlier, Shidehara Kijūrō also became vice-minister at this time).

A new government was formed under Terauchi Masatake in October 1916, and Motono Ichirō—longtime ambassador to Russia—was named as the new foreign minister. He would in turn ultimately be replaced by Home Minister Gotō Shinpei. The Terauchi government is well known for providing the “Nishihara Loans” to the Duan Qirui administration in China. These were named after Nishihara Kamezō, Terauchi's personal secretary, who had personally negotiated the arrangement with the Beiyang government. It was also the Terauchi government that carried out the Siberian Expedition.

Shidehara continued to serve as vice-minister through the end of the Terauchi government. Despite being only six years younger than Shidehara, Hirota remained in his position as 1st Section director in the Commercial Affairs Bureau through all four years of Shidehara's tenure as vice-minister.

Hirota's main source of moral support following Yamaza's death was Hirata, his close friend who had joined the foreign ministry with him. Hirata was posted to Russia during this period to observe conditions in the Caucasus, but he returned to Japan after falling seriously ill. This illness worsened after his return and ultimately took his life in April 1918. He was only thirty-nine at the time of his death, a year younger than Hirota.

Four years earlier, Hirota had lost Yamaza, his protector; now he had lost his best friend as well.¹³ The two had been together since Fukuoka, and they had sworn that “together, we will shoulder Japan's foreign policy.” Hirota's grief was immeasurable.¹⁴

In December 1918, Hirota was assigned the position of first secretary at the Japanese embassy in Washington. The delicate nature of his relationship with Shidehara would continue to cast a pall on his future.

Estrangement from the Shidehara Faction—at the Japanese Embassy to the US

As Hirota left Tokyo for San Francisco, his rivals Saburi Sadao (who had entered the ministry one year before him) and Yoshida Shigeru (who had joined the same year) were attending the Paris Peace Conference and getting to be active on the international stage. As he arrived at the Japanese embassy in Washington in late May 1919, storm clouds were gathering between Japan and the US over the Siberian Expedition and the issue of Japanese immigration.

Hirota expressed concerns about Japan's relations with the West over China to a reporter on the ship crossing the Pacific: "Japan must not touch China proper or violate the Western spheres of influence. Doing so could unite the Western powers against us and endanger our position."

Meeting Consul Ōta Tamekichi in San Francisco, Hirota expressed a desire to investigate the conditions faced by local Japanese immigrants before heading on to Washington. He then toured orchards, morning markets, and fishing ports. The immigrants, who had hitherto been angered at being "abandoned," welcomed him as "the first foreign ministry official to ever come visit us."¹⁵

Having completed his investigation into the immigrants' status, he took up his position at the embassy. Soon afterwards, Saburi joined the embassy as another first secretary, and Shidehara was then appointed ambassador to the United States.

As is the case today, only the most elite diplomats are made ambassador to the US and recipients typically have experience serving at the bureau director and vice-minister level. This was a time when Japan only had embassies in six countries—Britain, France, Russia (although that embassy would be closed from February 1918 through February 1925 due to the revolution), Italy, the United States, and Germany—and the position of ambassador to the US was seen as a likely precursor to becoming foreign minister. Shidehara's career followed the ideal path for a Japanese diplomat, as he moved from one important post to another—bureau director, vice-minister, ambassador to the US, and foreign minister—before ultimately serving as prime minister.

Shidehara liked to work with subordinates whom he trusted. And at the US embassy, Saburi, not Hirota, was the first secretary in whom Shidehara placed all his trust. That Saburi was working in America at all was because Shidehara had personally facilitated his appointment in anticipation of becoming ambassador.¹⁶

Saburi and Hirota were roughly the same age, but while Hirota had failed to pass the 14th diplomatic officer's examination, Saburi had received the top score. There is no question that Saburi was an excellent diplomat, and it is understandable that Shidehara would value him so highly. The intellectual Saburi was somewhat standoffish, however, and it took time for others to get to know him. Shidehara was also overly reliant on him and failed to provide adequate guidance to his other subordinates.

These two factors led to increasing dissatisfaction within the embassy, and younger members of the staff such as Third Secretary Ishii Itarō placed their hopes in Hirota.

According to Ishii, “Hirota did not make any ostentatious efforts to charm the younger staff; rather, his nonchalant broadmindedness and wisdom naturally won over their hearts.” Other younger diplomats at the embassy at this time included Shiratori Toshio, Ōhashi Chūichi, and Morishima Morito.

Left largely to his own devices by Shidehara, Hirota worked to cultivate well-informed opinions, conscientiously reading over new publications and the English-language press. Despite not being a skilled English speaker, he still occasionally earned the respect of Americans with his insight.

During this period, the embassy received a telegram from Tokyo informing Shidehara that he had been elevated to the rank of baron. The embassy was extremely excited to learn of yet another accolade for the promising Shidehara.

But while the staff was quick to congratulate Shidehara, Ishii recalled that “Hirota alone quietly read the telegram without offering his congratulations. He seemed to take a transcendent attitude to the matter, as if he did not care about awards for meritorious work. Even this made him look great in our eyes. He generally did not express happiness or anger.”¹⁷

This is more than just a passing anecdote. It is another example of Hirota maintaining his distance from the Shidehara faction, who by this time had become the mainstream in the ministry.

Saburi and Debuchi Katsuji were at the center of the Shidehara faction, and it seems fair to place Matsudaira Tsuneo, Kimura Eiichi, and Nagai Matsuzō there as well. These diplomats monopolized the major posts in the foreign ministry for most of the 1920s, and Shidehara himself would hold the post of foreign minister in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Hirota would of course ultimately serve as foreign minister for three and a half years in the 1930s and become prime minister himself following the February 26th Incident. But his estrangement from the Shidehara faction meant that a long road awaited him first.

The Western and Reformist Factions—2nd Section Director of the Information Department

In this section, I would like to again examine the connections between foreign ministry personnel.

Because of their emphasis on the importance of relations with the West, men like Shidehara, Saburi, Debuchi, Hirota, and Satō Naotake are classified into the ministry’s Western faction. The Shidehara faction represented the mainstream of the Western faction.

By the time Arita Hachirō was appointed director of the Asian Affairs Bureau in September 1927, another group had formed that included Arita, Shigemitsu Mamoru, Tani Masayuki, and Shiratori Toshio who came to be referred to as the Reformist (or Asian) faction.

The Reformist faction's origins can be found in the Foreign Ministry Reform Association (Gaimushō Kakushin Dōshi), a group of about forty young diplomats. The core of this group was made up of diplomats who had participated in the Paris Peace Conference like Arita, Shigemitsu, Saitō Hiroshi, and Horinouchi Kensuke. As the name suggests, it called for organizational reform of the ministry and additional training for its personnel. The Reformist faction also tended to be more sympathetic toward China.

The overall state of major positions within the ministry during this decade can be seen in Tables 3.1 and 3.2.

While Hirota could be classified policywise as belonging to the Western faction through the 1920s, in terms of his personal connections, he was closer to the Reformist faction.¹⁸ Hirota adopted a somewhat precarious stance that can be described as attempting to maintain favorable relations with both China and the West. He would ultimately increasingly favor the “Sino-Japanese partnership” advocated for by the Reformists following the Manchurian Incident, however.

Hirota was particularly close to Arita, the faction's leader, and he would name Arita foreign minister as prime minister. According to Arita, “It was Hirota Kōki, then first secretary at the embassy in Washington, who was the first to arrive as an ally. He had the air of both a politician and that of a member of the Gen'yōsha.” It seems fair to say that both of these aspects of Hirota's personality would have made him incompatible with the mainstream Shidehara faction.¹⁹

Hirota departed Washington in November 1920, returning to Japan via San Francisco. Upon his arrival, he became director of the Information Department's 2nd Section. This department had been created in the wake of the Paris Peace Conference as the foreign ministry realized that it had fallen far behind in its public diplomacy efforts. It was charged with information gathering, propaganda, and research. The 1st Section primarily dealt with China and Hong Kong, while the 2nd and 3rd Sections were in charge of the West and general affairs respectively. As such, Hirota was now in charge of the section overseeing intelligence and propaganda concerning the West.

The Washington Conference began in November 1921 and resulted in the Washington Naval Treaty (also known as the Five-Power Treaty) limiting naval construction and the Nine-Power Treaty which stipulated that China's sovereignty and the principle of the Open Door were to be respected. The Anglo-Japanese alliance was also terminated at the conference as part of the Four-Power Treaty on maintaining the status quo in the Pacific. Shidehara and Saburi played active roles in the conference, while Hirota—who had yet to attend an international conference—remained in Tokyo.

Despite his estrangement from Shidehara and Saburi, Hirota was not very far from them policywise. He supported the termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, countering criticism from Egi Tasuku (a member of the House of Peers) in the magazine *Gaikō Jihō* with the assertion that “the Four-Power Treaty has led to extremely positive relations between Japan and the United States.” The end of the alliance had been promoted at the conference by none other than Shidehara.²⁰

While published in Hirota's name, the actual author of the article was Amō Eiji, who had attended the conference as a member of the European and American Affairs

Table 3.1 Major Figures in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1920s)

Prime minister	Foreign minister	Vice-Minister	East Asian Affairs Bureau director	European and American Affairs Bureau director	Commercial Bureau director	Treaty Bureau director	Information Department director
Hara Takashi Takahashi Korekiyo Katō Tomosaburō	Uchida Kōsai	Shidehara Kijūrō Hanihara Masanao Tanaka Tokichi	Yoshizawa Kenkichi Debuchi Katsuji	Matsudaira Tsuneo Hirota Kōki	Hanihara Masanao Tanaka Tokichi Nagai Matsuzō	Matsuda Michikazu Yamakawa Tadao	Ijūin Hikokichi Tanaka Tokichi
Yamamoto Gonbee	Ijūin Hikokichi	Matsudaira Tsuneo	Debuchi Katsuji	Hirota Kōki	Nagai Matsuzō	Yamakawa Tadao	Matsudaira Tsuneo
Kiyoura Keigo	Matsui Keishirō	Matsudaira Tsuneo	Debuchi Katsuji	Hirota Kōki	Nagai Matsuzō	Yamakawa Tadao	Matsudaira Tsuneo
Katō Takaaki Wakatsuki Reijirō	Shidehara Kijūrō	Matsudaira Tsuneo Debuchi Katsuji	Debuchi Katsuji Kimura Eiichi	Hirota Kōki Hotta Masaaki	Saburi Sadao Saitō Ryōe	Yamakawa Tadao Nagaoka Harukazu Saburi Sadao	Matsudaira Tsuneo Debuchi Katsuji
Tanaka Giichi	Tanaka Giichi	Debuchi Katsuji Yoshida Shigeru	Kimura Eiichi Arita Hachirō	Hotta Masaaki	Saitō Ryōe Taketomi Toshihiko	Saburi Sadao Matsunaga Naokichi	Debuchi Katsuji Komura Kim'ichi
Hamaguchi Osachi Wakatsuki Reijirō	Shidehara Kijūrō	Yoshida Shigeru Nagai Matsuzō	Arita Hachirō Tani Masayuki	Hotta Masaaki Matsushima Hajime	Taketomi Toshihiko	Matsunaga Naokichi Matsuda Michikazu	Saitō Hiroshi Shiratori Toshio

Source: Hattori Ryūji, *Shidehara Kijūrō to 21 Seiki no Nihon—Gaiikō to Minshushugi* (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 2006)

Table 3.2 Major
Ambassadorial Postings
(1920s)

<i>Ambassador to the United States</i>	
11/1919	Shidehara Kijūrō
2/1923	Hanihara Masanao
3/1925	Matsudaira Tsuneo
10/1928	Debuchi Katsuji
<i>Ambassador to the United Kingdom</i>	
7/1916	Chinda Sutemi
9/1920	Hayashi Gonsuke
8/1925	Matsui Keishirō
1/1929	Matsudaira Tsuneo
<i>Ambassador to France</i>	
2/1916	Matsui Keishirō
9/1920	Ishii Kikujirō
2/1928	Adachi Mineichirō
6/1930	Yoshizawa Kenkichi
<i>Ambassador to the Soviet Union</i>	
3/1925	Satō Naotake (acting)
7/1925	Tanaka Tokichi
12/1930	Hirota Kōki
<i>Minister to China</i>	
12/1918	Obata Yūkichi
7/1923	Yoshizawa Kenkichi
10/1929	Saburi Sadao
6/1931	Shigemitsu Mamoru

Source Hattori Ryūji, *Shidehara Kijūrō to 21 Seiki no Nihon—Gaikō to Minshushugi* (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 2006)

Bureau's 2nd Section. As will be described in the following chapter, Amō would later become famous for making the “Amō Statement.”²¹

In December 1922, Hirota was promoted to deputy director of the Information Department.

Establishing Relations with the Soviet Union—Director of the European and American Affairs Bureau

When the 2nd Yamamoto Gonbee government was formed in September 1923, Hirota was appointed director of the European and American Affairs Bureau under Foreign Minister Ijūin Hikokichi. The bureau was composed of three sections: the 1st Section,

in charge of the Soviet Union; the 2nd Section, in charge of Europe and its colonies; and the 3rd Section, overseeing the United States. Tōgō Shigenori was director of the 1st Section, Horinouchi Kensuke was director of the 2nd Section, and Kuwashima Kazue was director of the 3rd Section. The Yamamoto government had been formed in the wake of the Great Kantō Earthquake and would last for only four months before resigning to take responsibility for the Toranomon Incident (an assassination attempt on Hirohito, who was then crown prince and regent).

When the Kiyoura Keigo government was formed in January 1924, the position of foreign minister passed from Ijūin to Matsui Keishirō. Kiyoura was a former bureaucrat with ties to Yamagata Aritomo, and his cabinet was largely drawn from members of the Kenkyūkai, one of the factions within the House of Peers. The only political party to back the government was the Seiyūhontō, leading to criticism from the Kenseikai, Rikken Seiyūkai, and Kakushin Club (who between them held a majority of the House of Representatives) that the government was an anachronism.

These three parties won an overwhelming victory in the May 1924 general election, leading to the formation of a new government the following month in which Katō Takaaki, president of the Kenseikai, served as prime minister. This change in government meant that Matsui stepped down as foreign minister after just five months and was replaced by Shidehara (who was Katō's brother-in-law). Shidehara would remain in the position through the Katō government and the subsequent government of Wakatsuki Reijirō. The practice of party governments was taking root in Japan, and the period referred to as "Shidehara Diplomacy" accompanied it.

During this period, it was the Asian Affairs Bureau that was seen as the pinnacle of the ministry hierarchy, not Hirota's European and American Affairs Bureau. The constant difficulties in Japan's relations with China meant that it was frequently able to make its presence felt and led to a tendency for the most outstanding personnel to be assigned to the bureau. Its distinguished position even led some in the ministry to speak of an "Asian Affairs Bureau Monroe Doctrine." Ishii recalled that "there were criticisms that a certain clique had taken hold of the Asian Affairs Bureau, barring outsiders from the bureau and ensuring that choice positions went to bureau members when they were transferred overseas. This was considered outrageous."²²

The bureau's director was Debuchi Katsuji, a member of the Shidehara faction who was also close to Vice-Minister Matsudaira Tsuneo, having entered the ministry in the same year. When Debuchi was promoted to the position of vice-minister, he was succeeded by Kimura Eiichi, another central figure in the Shidehara faction. Shidehara also arranged for Saburi Sadao to become director of the Commercial Affairs Bureau. In other words, the Shidehara faction controlled the key positions in the ministry. Even so, Hirota did not attempt to get closer to it.

The greatest challenge faced by the European and American Affairs Bureau during Hirota's tenure was the issue of normalizing relations with the Soviet Union. The Siberian Expedition had come to an end in 1922, but Japan had still not taken the step of formally recognizing the new government. Soviet-Japanese relations were closely intertwined with questions of fishing rights and the development of oil fields, and Hirota took these on directly.

Relations were reestablished through the Soviet-Japanese Basic Convention, signed in Beijing in January 1925 by Minister to China Yoshizawa Kenkichi and Soviet Ambassador to China Lev Karakhan. Under Article Two of the treaty, the parties promised that “the Treaty of Portsmouth remains in effect in all respects.”

According to Tōgō, at the beginning of the negotiations between Yoshizawa and Karakhan, “Hirota argued to one and all that there needed to be language recognizing the Treaty of Portsmouth. This was thus made part of our basic policy and clearly stipulated in the Beijing treaty.” Hirota’s focus was on ensuring that the Soviets acknowledged that the treaty that his deceased mentors Komura and Yamaza had worked so hard on was still in effect.²³

“The Character of a Politician”

In July 1924, the Kōkōkyo incorporated as a foundation. For Hirota, the Kōkōkyo was almost a part of him; it was something that he had created and could not forget. While his duties as a bureau director kept him busy, he still sometimes turned his attention to the Kōkōkyo.

When Gotō Fumio (a former home ministry official) formed the New Japan Alliance (NJA; Shin Nippon Dōmei) in March 1925, Hirota served on the organization’s board. Other members of the group’s leadership included Member of the House of Peers Konoe Fumimaro and Ogata Taketora, the editor-in-chief of the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun. The NJA was critical of political parties and was worried about the influence of socialism in Japan.

Suffrage was extended to all males twenty-five and older by the General Election Law in May 1925, and the NJA carried out efforts to provide political education to the public. Hirota and Komura Kin’ichi, the deputy director of the Information Department, were the only foreign ministry officials to serve as leaders in the group.²⁴ Komura was the son of the late Komura Jutarō but “had a remarkably poor reputation within the ministry” and was regarded as “a man of clever words but no sincerity.”²⁵

Hirota’s involvement with a group critical of party politics distinguished him from Foreign Minister Shidehara and Vice-Minister Debuchi. Shidehara was largely unconcerned with domestic politics and sought to maintain continuity in foreign policy under party politics. Hirota’s actions were uncharacteristic of a diplomat and therefore stood out.

According to Horinouchi Kensuke, Hirota “displayed the character of a politician from early on. [...] He left all administrative matters to me, allowing him to happily concentrate on his work. His office was frequented by Diet members, businessmen, and civilian patriots (*shishi*), making him truly seem like an important bureau director.”²⁶ His politician-like behavior must have made Shidehara and Debuchi very uncomfortable.

Ishii Itarō, who was now director of the Commercial Affairs Bureau’s 3rd Section, also wrote about Hirota’s style of working:

Hirota was rather ordinary as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau, but he made decisions at such a pace that it was said that papers never piled up on his desk. And it's true; I never once saw a piece of paper on his desk on any of the occasions that I visited. I could not help but be impressed by the difference [between his desk and those of other bureau directors].²⁷

Hirota continued to be at odds with Shidehara and Debuchi, and it was decided in November 1926 to appoint him as minister to the Netherlands (he had been given a choice between the Netherlands and Switzerland). Debuchi wrote in his diary that Hirota “will not rise any higher [in the ministry]; he is not fit to become vice-minister.”²⁸

Minister to the Netherlands

The Kenseikai government of Wakatsuki Reijirō fell in April 1927 and was replaced by a Seiyūkai government under Tanaka Giichi. Prime Minister Tanaka took on the role of foreign minister himself, but he left Debuchi in place as vice-minister. Hirota departed Tokyo shortly after this change in the political environment, arriving in The Hague in June, having traveled via Siberia.

Even though the Shidehara faction had removed him from his position as bureau director, Hirota did not dislike being posted to the Netherlands. Even as bureau director, he had emphasized the importance of economic ties to the Dutch East Indies and paid attention to The Netherlands itself.

Yoshida Tan'ichirō, who had worked under Hirota at the European and American Affairs Bureau, wrote that “the director had a high opinion of the economic potential of the Dutch East Indies and paid extremely close attention to the progress of Japanese merchants in the region and to the movements of Dutch and Dutch East Indian officials and civilians towards Japan.”²⁹

It was thus only natural that Hirota had chosen the Netherlands over Switzerland. During his tenure, he repeatedly met with Foreign Minister van Blokland and others and reported back home on Japan's trade relationship with the Netherlands and the country's domestic politics.³⁰

He later wrote of the country that:

The Netherlands is a nation that is among the most powerful in Europe economically despite being only the size of Kyushu, carrying out a great amount of trade. It possesses colonies in the Pacific larger than the motherland. While it is a small nation of only seven million, its people are diligent and tireless; it finds itself in between the three powers of Britain, France, and Germany, and yet it shows no inferiority to them in any respect. As I saw the present state of the nation and how it was developing, I often reflected on home. It made me painfully aware of how Japan, located on an isolated archipelago in the Orient, has not been blessed geographically.

He also said that the country had “many politicians worthy of admiration” and that “the people as a whole are solid, faithful to the end, and capable of overcoming any national difficulty.”³¹

During Hirota's time in Europe, the Tanaka government suffered a setback with the assassination of Zhang Zuolin on June 4, 1928. Tanaka's China policy had emphasized the importance of maintaining good relations with Zhang, but the Kwantung Army bombed his train on its own initiative. In an attempt to stabilize relations with China, the Tanaka government named Yoshida Shigeru as vice-minister on July 24. Yoshida had extensive experience in China and had entered the foreign ministry in the same year as Hirota.

Like Hirota, Yoshida had been outside of the foreign ministry mainstream. That he was able to become vice-minister despite that fact was the result of becoming close to Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori Tsutomu, a powerful member of the Seiyūkai (the party in power), and personally meeting with Tanaka to sell him on the idea.³² Yoshida's pushiness led to him being known as the "uninvited vice-minister." With Yoshida's appointment, Shidehara's confidante was made ambassador to the United States.

Meanwhile, Hirota was approaching fifty without having ever participated in an international conference, let alone having served as vice-minister, and had no prospects for returning to Japan in the near future. He had been born the son of a stonemason and had married the daughter of a Gen'yōsha member; his pedigree did not compare to that of Yoshida, who had Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Makino Nobuaki as his father-in-law. It does not seem implausible to say that Hirota was growing impatient with the progress of his career.

On August 27, the Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed in Paris. Under this treaty, the signatories—fifteen countries including France, the United States, and Japan—swore to resolve inter-state disputes through peaceful means. Privy Councilor Uchida Kōsai, a former foreign minister, signed for Japan. The treaty was criticized in Japan on the grounds that the language stating that the signatories "solemnly declare in the names of their respective peoples" could be a violation of the Emperor's authority (as he was not beholden to the Japanese people).

Hirota met with Uchida in London shortly after the signing and "offered various proposals on guiding popular opinion at home and the policies of the Privy Council." As will be discussed in the following chapter, Hirota's decision to travel to Britain from the Netherlands to meet Uchida may have been a stepping-stone to his later appointment as foreign minister.³³

First International Conference

Hirota finally experienced his first international conference in August 1929, when he participated (alongside Ambassador to France Adachi Mineichirō and Ambassador to Belgium Nagai Matsuzō) as a representative for Japan at a conference on Germany's reparations at The Hague.

The first stage of the conference was held from August 6–31, with its work divided between political and financial commissions. Hirota attended the meetings of the political commission with Adachi. These involved the issue of the withdrawal of

Allied forces from the Rhineland in western Germany. The region was occupied by Britain, France, and Belgium, and Germany was seeking an earlier withdrawal than that laid out in the Treaty of Versailles. In the meantime, the financial commission dealt with the question of Germany's reparations.

France was opposed to any early withdrawal, but British Foreign Secretary Henderson told Hirota that "Britain and Belgium intend to complete the withdrawal of our forces by Christmas." At the end of the deliberations, it was agreed that, while Britain and Belgium would withdraw by the end of December, France would have until June of the following year. While the occupation of the Rhineland was not an issue that directly involved Japan, as Hirota's first international conference it was a valuable experience for him, albeit a late one.³⁴

He also attended the 10th plenary session of the League of Nations in Geneva in September 1929 as a plenipotentiary delegate for Japan and served with Ambassador to Britain Matsudaira Tsuneo on the Sixth Committee (which dealt with political issues). At this session the committee deliberated on the issues of slavery and the administration of League mandates.³⁵

The Netherlands' relations with China also drew Hirota's attention during this period. A port was being constructed in Huludao on the northern shore of Bohai Bay which, if completed, would likely have a negative effect on the Japanese-leased port of Dalian and, by extension, the South Manchuria Railway. This was intentional, as the effort was an attempt by Zhang Xueliang's Northeast regime to counter Dalian. Complicating the effort was an earlier Chinese attempt to have the British construct such a port in the late Qing period. That work had been interrupted, but when Zhang entered into a contract with a Dutch company in January 1931, Britain protested. Undeterred, he moved forward anyway.

Observing this from the Netherlands, Hirota wrote Shidehara (who had returned to the position of foreign minister in 1929 with the formation of the Hamaguchi Osachi government) that "the Dutch port company is confident that the contract is completely legal." Still, he warned that, should the contract be completed, "China will be equipped with its own port in Manchuria and there will be no need for Dalian as a port for exports."³⁶ Hamaguchi was president of the Minseitō and had been friends with Shidehara since their time together at the Third Higher Middle School.

Ambassador to the Soviet Union

Hirota left the Netherlands in April 1930 after having spent nearly three years in the country. His mother Take had passed away during his absence and, while returning to Japan, he received word in Manzhouli that his son Tadao had died.³⁷ He spent several months observing the developments at home before Shidehara appointed him ambassador to the Soviet Union. This would be the first and only time that Hirota would serve as an ambassador.

Hirota arrived at Tokyo Station at nine a.m. on November 14 to board the Tsubame express, the first step on his trip to Moscow. He was seen off by a crowd of about two

hundred well-wishers, with Shidehara and Hirota's sons at the front of the crowd. Unexpectedly, Prime Minister Hamaguchi also made an appearance.

Known as the "Lion Premier," Hamaguchi intended to attend army exercises in Okayama and was to board the sixth car of the train, the same first-class car that Hirota was in. But as he passed the fifth car, a gunshot rang out. A young man in traditional Japanese dress, motivated by dissatisfaction with the London Naval Treaty and rural poverty, had approached Hamaguchi and shot him.

The bullet punctured his lower abdomen, nearly piercing a kidney. The police immediately subdued the assailant, but Hamaguchi was covered in blood. Even so, he managed to say, "I have served my country" (*danshi no honkai de aru*).³⁸ Hamaguchi's attendant hurriedly removed his luggage from the train, yelling to Hirota that "the prime minister has been murdered." The express train slowly began its journey, leaving Tokyo Station in an uproar behind it.³⁹

After spending several days in Fukuoka, Hirota crossed into Korea and passed through Mukden (Shenyang), Harbin, and Manzhouli before boarding the Trans-Siberian Railway for Moscow. He finally arrived at the Japanese embassy on December 2, presenting his credentials to the Soviet government and taking up his post on the following day.

He had officially made it to ambassador, but Hirota may have still felt conflicted about the accomplishment. He was fifty-two years old. Shidehara, the man who had seen him off at Tokyo Station, had become vice-minister at the age of forty-three and ambassador to the United States at forty-seven. When he had turned fifty-two it had been as foreign minister. He was only six years Hirota's senior, but he was already in his second term as foreign minister and, with the attempted assassination of Hamaguchi, acting prime minister. Both of the most likely candidates to succeed him as foreign minister—Ambassador to the US Debuchi and Ambassador to Britain Matsudaira—were confidantes of his.

Despite serving during the height of the Shidehara faction's power, Hirota had boldly chosen to keep his distance from it. Shidehara, Debuchi, and Matsudaira had all served as vice-minister prior to becoming ambassadors, but Hirota had not, and there was a chance that his posting in the Soviet Union would be final position in the foreign ministry. Nevertheless, he had no choice but to carry out his duties as ambassador. He would have had no idea that his time in the Soviet Union would dramatically improve his career prospects.

The first thing Hirota focused on in Moscow was the damage that the Soviet Union was doing to its relations with France. In a lengthy telegram to Shidehara, he explained that the Soviets viewed France as a "command center" for anti-Soviet activities in Europe and that Soviet Premier Molotov had criticized French Foreign Minister Briand as being "the leader of the anti-Soviet movement."⁴⁰

The Soviets had severed their relations with China in July 1929 as a result of the 1929 Sino-Soviet Conflict over the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) in north-east China. When Hirota took up his post in 1931, unofficial talks over the railway were underway between the two countries. Hirota kept Shidehara apprised of Zhang Xueliang's actions based on information from Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Karakhan and other sources.⁴¹

Fishing disputes and the expansion of trade were the pending issues between Japan and the Soviet Union at the time of Hirota's appointment. He repeatedly met with Molotov and Karakhan to find resolutions and argued that "Japan's traditional policy has been to maintain the peace, and this has become all the more entrenched under the current government."⁴² Negotiations over fishing proved particularly difficult, as the Soviets were putting pressure on the Japanese fishing industry through its fisheries in Kamchatka and Okhotsk. Hirota needed to secure stable fishing grounds for Japan. It was as these discussions were ongoing that a seismic event in international politics occurred: the Manchurian Incident.

The Manchurian Incident

On September 18, 1931, the Kwantung Army detonated explosives on the South Manchuria Railway tracks at Liutiao Lake near Fengtian. It then used this as a justification for sending troops into the region. Karakhan and People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov demanded an explanation from Hirota in the wake of the bombing.

A week later, he delineated the Japanese government's policy of non-expansion to Litvinov. He further explained "the current situation in Manchuria, particularly the fact that Kuanchengzi Station would not be occupied and that no troops would be sent to Harbin." Kuanchengzi Station was a point of great concern for the Soviet Union as it was located three kilometers to the northwest of Changchun and was part of the CER's southern line and under joint Sino-Soviet management. Litvinov thanked Hirota for the explanation.

But while the 2nd Wakatsuki Reijirō government (Minseitō) had adopted a policy of non-expansion, the Kwantung Army ignored this and continued to expand its occupation through all of northeast China. The army's actions clearly contradicted the policy that Hirota was instructed to convey to the Soviets, and it would have been unsurprising for them to have demanded an explanation. But when Hirota visited Karakhan on October 28, rather than explain the contradiction, he instead took steps to prevent any Soviet military mobilization. He explained that, should Soviet forces be dispatched to protect the CER, "our military would have no choice but to take the necessary steps to protect our residents and investments in the Taoang Line." Karakhan responded to his pressure by answering "to the effect that they would maintain a policy of strict non-interference."⁴³

In mid-November, the Kwantung Army occupied Qiqihar in Heilongjiang Province. This was a strategic position north of the CER lines and of vital interest to the Soviet Union. Relations with the Soviets were becoming tense, and the Japanese embassy was even informed of an aborted attempt to assassinate Hirota.⁴⁴

Shidehara informed Hirota and Ambassador to the US Debuchi that he intended to force a rapid withdrawal of the Kwantung Army from Qiqihar. Hirota decided not to convey this message to the Soviets, however, as he was skeptical that any such withdrawal would happen in the near future.

Embassy Counselor Amō Eiji supported Hirota's decision on the matter. He had returned to Japan in the wake of the initial bombing and spoken to foreign ministry personnel like Shidehara to ascertain their intentions. He had also met with key figures in Manchuria. Returning to Moscow in early November, he provided Hirota with the latest information from Tokyo and Manchuria.⁴⁵ This meant that Hirota had a grasp on the situation in both areas.

Acting on this information, when he met Litvinov on November 20, rather than passing on Shidehara's message, he merely stated that "the Japanese army will continue to respect the Chinese Eastern Railway's interests."⁴⁶

As Hirota had foreseen, there was no rapid Japanese withdrawal from Qiqihar. He also requested that the Soviets make accommodations for Japanese in Manchuria who decided to return home.⁴⁷

Fengtian Consul Morishima Morito later commented on the difference between Hirota and Debuchi's response to Shidehara's instructions:

In America, Ambassador Debuchi (a follower of Foreign Minister Shidehara) consistently followed the ministry instructions he received verbatim, a practice that led to him receiving the dishonorable monicker of "the lying ambassador." In contrast, Ambassador to the Soviet Union Hirota, knowledgeable about domestic politics, was skeptical of the foreign ministry's reports and suppressed them, getting better results.⁴⁸

This was perhaps the first time in which Hirota's estrangement from Shidehara worked in his favor.

Hirota had returned to Japan from the Netherlands in April 1930 and spent several months observing conditions at home prior to becoming ambassador to the Soviet Union. In contrast, Debuchi had not left the United States in three years. Hirota's familiarity with domestic politics and his distance from Shidehara resulted in a clear difference between his and Debuchi's response to the Manchurian Incident.

Manchukuo and the Lytton Commission

When the Wakatsuki government fell in December 1931, Shidehara departed the foreign ministry. He had created an era of Japanese foreign policy, but he had been unable to completely manage the fallout from the Manchurian Incident. Shidehara's departure from the government gave a boost to Hirota, who had formerly been an outsider. While the Manchurian Incident was a time of tribulation for the foreign ministry as a whole, it actually enhanced Hirota's position.

Wakatsuki was succeeded by a Seiyūkai government under Inukai Tsuyoshi. Ambassador to France Yoshizawa Kenkichi was recalled to Japan and appointed foreign minister. And in January 1932, the Kwantung Army turned its sights to Harbin and northern Manchuria.

After asking the ministry for instructions, Hirota requested permission from the Soviets for use of the CER to transport Japanese troops. Meeting with Karakhan, he asked that such usage be granted as quickly as possible while offering assurances

that “our army will, as always, fully respect Soviet interests in the Chinese Eastern Railway; its intention is to protect local [Japanese] residents.” Karakhan had no choice but to grant the exceptional request.⁴⁹

On March 1, the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo was announced. Hirota was likely privately bitter about the way that force had been used to destroy the status quo in the wake of the Manchurian Incident. But the role of a diplomat is to defend their nation’s positions within the environment they are presented with; he thus had no choice but to advocate for Japan’s interests. Doing otherwise would mean failing as a diplomat. From this point on, Hirota would have to take the existence of Manchukuo as a given as he conducted diplomacy.

The foreign ministry instructed Hirota that Japanese policy toward Manchukuo would be based on three pillars: maintaining order in the region as Manchukuo was the frontline of Japan’s national defense; respect for the feelings of the Japanese people and Manchuria’s historical relations with Japan; and respect for Japan’s rights and interests. Manchukuo was, of course, to be treated as if it were an independent nation. Hirota met with Karakhan to explain Japan’s Manchukuo policy.

There was no question that Manchukuo was a Japanese puppet, however, and there was no chance of Karakhan accepting Hirota’s explanation at face value. He instead pressed on this point, asserting that “the new state in Manchuria was clearly brought about through direct Japanese pressure.” Hirota brushed off Karakhan’s criticism, saying that, “should the new Manchurian state respect the treaty rights desired by Japan, preserve the security of the lives and property of Japanese citizens, and strive to build friendly relations with Japan, then we welcome its establishment.”⁵⁰ He held firm to the pretense that Manchukuo was a new independent state.

Prime Minister Inukai was assassinated in the May 15th Incident and succeeded by Saitō Makoto, a retired naval officer. Mantetsu President Uchida Kōsai joined the cabinet as the new foreign minister, and the Saitō government worked toward recognition of Manchukuo. The League of Nations dispatched the Lytton Commission to China to carry out an investigation of the Manchurian Incident, and Hirota kept a close eye on the Soviet reaction to the commission.

According to Hirota’s telegrams to the foreign ministry, the Lytton Commission intended to travel to Heihe in Heilongjiang via Blagoveshchensk to meet with Ma Zhanshan, a leader of anti-Japanese forces in northern Manchuria. But when the commission requested transit visas from the Soviet government, it denied this request on the grounds that “it did not want to violate its policy of non-interference in the internal politics of Manchuria.” Hirota’s telegram informed the Saitō government that the Soviet government was not cooperating with the commission.⁵¹

Hirota continued to hold firm and make progress in the fishing negotiations with the Soviets during this period as well, finally reaching an agreement with Karakhan on August 13. Under the Hirota-Karakhan Accord, Japan would be permitted to continue to lease eighty percent of its then-leased fishing grounds until 1936 without competing with others.⁵²

Speaking to the House of Representatives on August 25, Foreign Minister Uchida stated that he was “determined to not give up one inch [in Manchuria], even if it burns the country to the ground.”⁵³ This hardline policy became known as “scorched-earth

diplomacy.” Japan recognized Manchukuo as an independent state on September 15 with the signing of the Japan-Manchukuo Protocol in the Manchukuoan capital of Xinjing (Changchun). Unsurprisingly, Japan wanted the Soviet Union to grant recognition to Manchukuo as well.

Two days after Japanese recognition, Hirota visited Karahan and requested that the Soviets do the same. While Karahan expressed a certain degree of understanding for Japan’s position, noting that “Japan’s recognition of Manchukuo has not changed the Soviet government’s policy of non-interference,” he brushed the request off by saying that the matter was “still under study.”

Hirota responded that “as one of its neighbors, Soviet recognition of Manchukuo in advance of the other powers would help clarify the situation in the Far East and aid in the establishment of peace in the region” and that “the sooner your nation recognizes Manchukuo, the greater the contribution to peace in the Far East.” While Karahan avoided giving an immediate answer, Hirota appreciated that the Soviet government also showed no desire to become involved in the post-Manchurian Incident situation in East Asia.⁵⁴

In late September, Hirota gave up the strenuous demands of being an ambassador, returning to Japan. He left Soviet-Japanese relations settled for the time being. As ambassador, he had negotiated tenaciously during the difficult period from the Manchurian Incident to the establishment of Manchukuo, successfully extracting a position of non-interference from the Soviets. He also produced results in other areas such as the Hirota-Karakhan Accord. By any measure, his time as ambassador deserved a passing grade.

Hirota’s View of the Soviet Union

But how did Hirota ultimately see the Soviet Union? After returning to Japan, he wrote an essay, “The Basics of Japan’s Foreign Policy” for the magazine *Chūō Kōron* in which he said that “Russia is still a country in a test tube” and that “it would be a mistake to view Russia merely in terms of ideology or the figures from its 1st and 2nd Five-Year Plans.”

The new Russia created in the revolution of 1917 is said to be a federation of “soviet socialism.” The present situation is one in which soviets – a type of organization that has existed in Russia for quite some time – are combined with socialism, an ideology novel to the country. And it must be said that the question of how these two elements are to be reconciled has yet to be determined.

Hirota suspected that the country had inherited Imperial Russia’s “aggressiveness” and saw the “move to socialism in one country under Stalin” as “evidence that politics in Russia do not operate on Marxism alone.”⁵⁵

The Soviet Union had proposed a non-aggression pact with Japan, and these factors caused Hirota to view the idea favorably. He believed that such a pact should be agreed to “once the various other pending issues are resolved.” This would not come to be, however.

The army's Imperial Way faction (Kōdō-ha) was at the height of its influence at this time, and it was fiercely anti-Soviet. Powerful members of the faction included War Minister Araki Sadao, Deputy Army Chief of Staff Masaki Jinsaburō, General Staff 3rd Section head Obata Toshishirō, and Military Affairs Bureau Staff Member Suzuki Teiichi. The army had always had anti-Soviet tendencies, but these were at their height under the influence of the Imperial Way faction.

This stance was shared by Mori Kaku of the Seiyūkai and Information Department Director Shiratori Toshio. Suzuki, Mori, and Shiratori worked in coordination and were a political force that could not be ignored. Closer Soviet-Japanese relations were also opposed by right-wing groups like the Kokuhonsha. Soviet policy had become Hirota's strongest area of expertise, and the failure of the non-aggression pact to gain any traction showed him how difficult the Japanese domestic environment had become for such policies.⁵⁶

Hirota's twenty-one months in the Soviet Union would be his only time as an ambassador. During that period, he had skillfully carried out difficult negotiations over trade, fishing, the Manchurian Incident, and Manchukuo, rapidly raising his profile. The Soviet Union's lengthy border with Manchukuo had increased the importance of Soviet-Japanese relations, and Hirota had come to be seen as the most knowledgeable figure on the country. With the Shidehara faction in decline, Hirota would, in his mid-fifties, enter the foreign ministry mainstream for the first time in his career.

The assassination of Prime Minister Inukai in the May 15th Incident had put an end to the era of party governments in Japan. It faced great uncertainties not just in its foreign affairs but at home as well. But these changes in the domestic and international environments were actually favorable for Hirota. This is because, as will be seen in the following chapter, Hirota—who had little attachment to party politics—was able to adapt to the rise of reformist forces while the Shidehara faction—closely tied to the previous era's foreign policy—lost ground.

After the turning point in his career that was his ambassadorship to the Soviet Union, Hirota had even come to be seen as a potential foreign minister. He was being pushed into a leadership role by the unstable currents of Japanese politics, and this rising tide did not seem likely to subside anytime soon. But it was unknown where they would take him.

Source Acronyms

- JDR Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* [Japanese Diplomatic Records] (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1975–1992)
MOFA Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo
NDL National Diet Library Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room

Notes

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2. Yoshizawa Kenkichi, *Gaikō 60-Nen* [60 Years of Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1990), 48.
3. Mushanokōji Kōkyō Danwa “Shidehara-san no Omoide” (“Shidehara Heiwa Bunko” Reel 3) NDL.
4. Hasegawa 155–57.
5. Hirota Kōki, “Nihon Gaikō no Kiso” [The Fundamentals of Japanese Diplomacy], *Chūō Kōron* (January 1934), 144–45.
6. Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Shigemitsu Mamoru Gaikō Kaisōroku* [Diplomatic Memoirs of Shigemitsu Mamoru] (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1953), 24.
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8. Hirota 144–45.
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13. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 58; Kokuryūkai, *Tōa Senkaku Shishi Denki* [Biographies of Pioneering East Asian Patriots] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1966), 2:724.
14. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 58.
15. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 596.
16. Shidehara Kijūrō, “Wasure-enu Hitobito—Kōyū Kaisōki” [Unforgettable Figures: Reminiscences of Friends], *Bungei Shunjū* (January 1951), 57. See also: Hattori Ryūji, *Shidehara Kijūrō to 20-Seiki no Nihon—Gaikō to Minshushugi* [Shidehara Kijūrō and 20th Century Japan: Diplomacy and Democracy] (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 2006), 45–60, 86–88 and Ryuji Hattori, *Japan at War and Peace: Shidehara Kijūrō and the Making of Modern Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021).
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19. Arita Hachirō, *Baka Hachi to Hito wa Iu—Gaikōkan no Kaisō* [I was Called “Baka Hachi”—Memories of a Diplomat] (Tokyo: Kōwadō, 1959), 29.
20. Hirota Kōki, “Egi Tasuku-shi no ‘Shikakoku Jōyaku to Beikoku Horyū’ o Yomu” [Reading Egi Tasuku’s “The Four-Power Treaty and America’s Reservations”], *Gaikō Jihō* No. 423 (1922), 1–13.
21. “Senden Kankei Zakken” (1.3.1.35, MOFA); Hirakawa Chōnin, “Egi-shi no ‘Shikakoku Jōyaku Sairon’ o Yomu” [Reading Egi’s “Re-arguing the Four-Power Treaty”], *Gaikō Jihō* No. 426 (1922), 36–53; Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shū Kankōkai, ed., *Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shu* [The Diary of Amō Eiji and Other Collected Materials] (Tokyo: Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shū Kankōkai, 1984), 1:1137.
22. Ishii 158.
23. Tōgō Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen* [Signs of the Times] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1985), 52–53.
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25. Ishii 160.
26. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 600, 601.
27. Ishii 160–61.
28. Takahashi Katsuhiko, ed., “‘Debuchi Katsuji Nikki’ (2) 1923–26” [The Diary of Debuchi Katsuji Vol. 2, 1923–26], *Kokugakuin Daigaku Nihon Bunka Kenkyūjo Kiyō*, No. 85 (2000), 470, 510, 520, 521, 523, 525; Ishii 160–61.

29. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 72.
30. “Shogaikoku Naisei Kankei Zakken Waran no Bu Yosan Kankei” (A.6.0.0.1-6-3, MOFA); “Waran Perushia Tsūshō Jōyaku Kankei Ikken” (B.2.0.0.N/PE1, MOFA); “Waran Porutogaru Tsūshō Jōyaku Kankei Ikken” (B.2.0.0.N/PR1, MOFA).
31. Hirota, “Nihon Gaikō no Kiso,” 140–41.
32. Yoshida Shigeru, *Kaisō 10-Nen* [10 Year Memoirs] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1958), 4:143–46.
33. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 79.
34. JDR, Shōwa-ki I, Part 2, Vol. 2, 405, 413, 424.
35. “Kokusai Renmei Sōkai Kankei Ikken Dai Jūkai Sōkai Kankei” Vol. 2 (B.9.1.0.2–10, MOFA); “Kokusai Renmei Sōkai Kankei Ikken Dai Jūkai Sōkai Kankei Jinji Kankei” (B.9.1.0.2-10-7, MOFA).
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39. Baba 403.
40. JDR, Shōwa-ki I, Part 2, Vol. 3, 538–41, 542–45.
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48. See: Morishima Morito, *Inbō Ansatsu Guntō* [Conspiracy, Assassination, and the Sword] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1950), 70.
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50. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European and Asian Affairs Bureau, 1st Section, ed., *Nichi “So” Kōshōshi*, 258–62. See also: Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, 91.
51. JDR, Manshū Jihen, Part 2, Vol. 1, 873–74.
52. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European and Asian Affairs Bureau, 1st Section, ed., *Nichi “So” Kōshōshi*, 174–81; JDR, Shōwa-ki II, Part 2, Vol. 1, 333–36. See also: Tomita Takeshi, “Manshū Jihen Zengo no Nichiso Gyogyō Kōshō—Kokka Tōseika no Gyoku Anteika e” [Soviet-Japanese Fishery Negotiations Before and After the Manchurian Incident: Towards Stabilization of Nationally Controlled Fishing Zones], *Rekishigaku Kenkyū* No. 834 (2007), 47–63, 80.
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Chapter 4

Straying from the Ideals of China Policy—Foreign Minister and Harmony Diplomacy



Abstract The fourth chapter examines Hirota’s first term as foreign minister from 1933 to 1936 with a particular emphasis on his policy goals for China and why those goals failed to come to fruition. Becoming foreign minister in the wake of the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo and Japan’s departure from the League of Nations, he initially sought to repair Japan’s damaged relationship with the international community, speaking of international goodwill and “harmony diplomacy.” But while he envisioned forming a “partnership” with China’s pro-Japanese faction, he paradoxically focused on the development of Manchukuo. What progress he did make with China was sabotaged by the Japanese army’s efforts to remove northern China from the Nationalist government’s control, however. And when confronted with pushback from the army, he consistently compromised. This can be seen in his announced “Three Principles” for China policy which, issued with military approval, consisted entirely of demands of China. He increasingly moved away from the pursuit of cooperation with China in favor of a Japan-led new order in East Asia. The chapter also discusses the Amō Statement, a 1934 statement demanding the withdrawal of Western influence from China, in depth, examining what that statement’s formulation reveals about the internal workings of the contemporary Japanese foreign ministry.

Appointment as Foreign Minister

Hirota departed Moscow in late September and, after traveling to the newly recognized Manchukuo via the Trans-Siberian Railway, arrived back in Japan in the following month. Lacking a new position, he spent much of his time at his villa in Kugenuma, located on the Kanagawa coast about sixty kilometers from Tokyo.

The Ōdakyū Enoshima Line had just opened a few year earlier, making travel to his villa convenient but also causing issues with noise as the train tracks ran only a few dozen meters away. Even so, he was only a few minutes’ walk away from the gentle Shōnan coast and a view of Enoshima. Walking along the beach with his wife Shizuko and their five children helped calm him.

This peaceful life would not last forever, however. He was appointed to take over Uchida Kōsai as foreign minister in September 1933, joining the government of Saitō Makoto. He would remain in the position for the next two and a half years, until April 1936.

While being held for the Tokyo Trials after the war, Hirota told Lt. Gen. Satō Kenryō of his appointment that:

None of this was the result of any plans on my part. I never sought to become prime or foreign minister. In fact, I would have preferred to decline the positions. But I felt compelled to accept them. I have generally made it to the present without putting things into motion myself. And I have no intention of changing that now.¹

True to his word, Hirota did not take the stand in his own defense at the trials.

And yet, one cannot help but feel skeptical of his claims here. Certainly, Hirota is unlikely to have expected to become prime minister; that was a sudden development, a result of the February 26th Incident. But the idea that he would have “preferred to decline the position” of foreign minister warrants further scrutiny. Would it not be more accurate to say that it was only his second term as foreign minister, in the Konoe government a few years later, that he was unenthusiastic about?

To put it another way, Hirota seems to have been fairly aware that he was going to be appointed as foreign minister in the Saitō government.

The journalist Baba Tsunego gave this contemporary appraisal of Hirota’s character:

Hirota is of a patriotic bent ill-suited for a diplomat. [...] But though he may be a patriot, he does not possess the lack of attention to detail that so often accompanies such “heroes.” Even though he has the passion of a patriot, his mind is meticulous, and his opinions are not flashy.²

This description captures both sides of Hirota: a meticulous, sedate diplomat who was also filled with a patriotic zeal. While most cool, rational diplomats sought to keep their distance from domestic politics, upon returning from the Soviet Union, Hirota resumed his pattern of actively interacting with politicians, right-wing activists, and the military. It is here that his “patriotism” comes through. Although now fifty-four, he had not lost his politician-like aspects, and there were rumors about him becoming a candidate for the House of Representatives. Indeed, it would be from this point on that these more unusual qualities of Hirota’s would be given a chance to shine.³

Pan-Asianist Tendencies

So, how did Hirota spend the nearly year-long period between his return to Japan and his September 1933 appointment as foreign minister?

One development from this time was his increasingly close ties to the Kokuikai (Society for the Preservation of the Nation). This was an organization based on the beliefs of the ideologue Yasuoka Masahiro who were critical of party politics and

sought to reform the governance of the country through “the Japanese spirit.” The Kokuikai was seen as an umbrella group for the reformist bureaucrats known as the “new bureaucrats” and included Home Ministry officials Gotō Fumio (serving as agricultural minister in the Saitō government) and Matsumoto Gaku among its members.

The Kokuikai believed that party politics were harmful and tended to degenerate into a struggle for leadership. Hirota became a director of the organization in December 1932 and traveled to Tokyo to participate in its activities from Kugenuma. It is likely that he interacted with Konoe Fumimaro, vice president of the House of Peers and another of the Kokuikai's directors, during this time. Hirota, Konoe, and Gotō had all known each other since their involvement in the New Japan Alliance.⁴

Under the leadership of Shidehara Kijūrō, the foreign ministry mainstream had attempted to carry out foreign policy in cooperation with party governments. One example of this coordination had been Shidehara's drafting of the Minseitō's statements on China policy. When Hamaguchi was shot, Shidehara had advised the wounded prime minister that “Wakatsuki would be an appropriate choice” to succeed him as Minseitō president.⁵ In contrast, Hirota had never held any attachment to party politics and showed no discomfort interacting with the Kokuikai. He was able to easily adapt to the new era of reformist forces.

Hirota was also a founding member of the Greater Asia Society (Dai Ajia Kyōkai) when it was created in March 1933. Formed in the wake of the founding of Manchukuo, it sought the “formation of a Greater Asian League” under the guidance of “Imperial Japan.” Other founding members of the group (there were forty in total) included Konoe Fumimaro, journalist Tokutomi Sohō, diplomat Shiratori Toshio, generals Matsui Iwane, Honma Masaharu, and Suzuki Teiichi, and admirals Suet-sugu Nobumasa and Ishikawa Shingo. As a member of the Supreme War Council, Matsui played an especially important role in the organization.

Hirota served as a councilor in the society, and it held a banquet in his honor when he was appointed foreign minister. Matsui had earlier suggested to Konoe and others that Hirota would be a more suitable foreign minister than Uchida. During this time, Hirota was in the process of moving away from his previous belief in cooperation with the West and showing more pan-Asianist tendencies.⁶

In May, the Tangu Truce was signed, establishing the border between China and Manchukuo. Hirota could feel the rise of reformist forces within Japan, and he began thinking about possible cooperation with China.

Hirota's Conditions for Joining the Cabinet

But what led to Hirota succeeding Uchida as foreign minister? Uchida was looking to step down; he was elderly, tended to overwork himself, and had begun commenting that he felt “completely exhausted and drained of energy.” Shigemitsu Mamoru, who was vice-minister of foreign affairs at the time, wrote that when Uchida asked him for advice on a new foreign minister, he endorsed Hirota, saying, “I believe that choosing

Ambassador Hirota Kōki, who has returned from the Soviet Union, would help calm down both the domestic and international situations.” When Uchida submitted his resignation to Prime Minister Saitō, he recommended that Hirota replace him.⁷

After Uchida sounded him out about the position, Hirota met with Saitō on September 14 and accepted it on two conditions: first, that “Japanese foreign policy will conform to the imperial rescript on the withdrawal from the League,” and second, that “the foreign minister will be the primary actor in Japanese foreign policy and receive the full support of the prime minister.”⁸

The referenced imperial rescript (issued on March 27, 1933), read in part:

By quitting the League and embarking on a course of its own, Our Empire does not mean that it will stand aloof in the Extreme Orient, nor that it will isolate itself thereby from the fraternity of nations. It is Our desire to promote mutual confidence between Our Empire and all the other Powers and to make known the justice of its cause throughout the world.⁹

In other words, even though he endorsed Japan’s departure from the League of Nations, the Emperor continued to desire international peace. This course resonated with Hirota, who believed that Japan should not pursue a path of isolationism and wanted to draw a clear line between his policies and Uchida’s earlier scorched earth diplomacy. His second condition—the centralization of foreign policy in the foreign ministry—was essential if he was to accomplish this.

Prime Minister Saitō had no objection to these conditions, and the ceremony formalizing his appointment to the cabinet was carried out that day at the palace. This course of events suggests that, at the very least, Hirota had anticipated that he might become foreign minister.

He assumed the position at a time when Japanese foreign policy was regaining its stability. Japan had left the League of Nations in March and signed the Tangu Truce in May, establishing the Great Wall as the China-Manchukuo border. The truce’s conclusion meant that the military operations that had been ongoing since the Manchurian Incident now came to a halt. With repairing Japan’s foreign relations now seemingly becoming more of a possibility, the appointment of Hirota—who was more likely to pursue a peaceful foreign policy than Uchida had been—was timely.

But why did Uchida decide that Hirota was the suitable choice? Shigemitsu’s endorsement was touched on earlier, but that would not have been decisive on its own; Ambassador to Britain Matsudaira and Ambassador to America Debuchi were surely powerful contenders for the position as well. Morishima Gorō, director of the Asian Affairs Bureau’s 1st Section, wrote later that:

I am not familiar with the process that led to the choice of Hirota, but all of the rumors at the time were that he had been Uchida’s personal choice. Ambassador to Britain Matsudaira and Ambassador to America Debuchi were also potential candidates, but they were also, to one extent or another, both linked to Shidehara.

In other words, Morishima believed that Uchida chose Hirota because he was not one of Shidehara’s followers. Hirota would go on to play a leading diplomatic role until late in the decade, continuing in the position when the Saitō government was replaced by one led by Okada Keisuke in July 1934.

When Morishima asked Hirota about his becoming foreign minister, Hirota only gave the brief reply that “Count Uchida knew me.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, Uchida had headed to London after signing the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and Hirota—then minister to the Netherlands—had gone there to meet him. This was during the period when the Shidehara faction had closed Hirota off from important ministry positions in Tokyo and dispatched him to Europe in what was an effective demotion (in stark contrast to Yoshida Shigeru, his contemporary in joining the ministry, who was made vice-minister). That his meeting with Uchida in London might be connected to his later appointment as foreign minister just shows how odd twists of fate can be.

Hirota and Morishima were well acquainted. Morishima was also a graduate of the Shūyūkan and had initially intended to join the home ministry but had been convinced by Hirota to choose the foreign ministry instead. By the point that Hirota became foreign minister, Morishima had already been serving as 1st Section director for nearly three years and was due for a promotion. Nevertheless, feeling that Morishima was an expert on China who was willing to stand up to the army, Hirota left him in place.¹⁰

Five-Minister Conference

After assuming the highest position in the foreign ministry, Hirota largely left the existing internal leadership structure—men like Vice-Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru, European and American Affairs Bureau Director Tōgō Shigenori, Commercial Affairs Bureau Director Kurusu Saburō, Treaties Bureau Director Kuriyama Shigeru, and Information Bureau Director Amō Eiji—untouched. The exception was the position of Asian Affairs Bureau director, which he changed from Tani Masayuki to Kuwashima Kazue. In June 1934, the Asian Affairs Bureau was renamed the East Asian Affairs Bureau, and the European and American Affairs Bureau was split into the European and Asian Affairs Bureau and the American Affairs Bureau. Tōgō became head of the European and Asian Affairs Bureau, while Horinouchi Kensuke became director of the American Affairs Bureau. It was with this leadership team in place that Hirota began trying his hand at Soviet affairs, regarded as his specialty, and the idea of a “Sino-Japanese partnership,” something he was becoming increasingly enthusiastic about.

Shortly after becoming foreign minister, Hirota met with President of the House of Peers Konoe, Home Ministry Chief Secretary Kido Kōichi, and Harada Kumao (secretary to Saionji Kinmochi) and told them:

First, we need to do something to improve relations with China, even if only slightly. I have sent a telegram to [Chinese] Minister [to Japan] Jiang [Zuobin], urging him to resume his post. But when I meet with him, he’s going to raise [the abolition of] extraterritorial rights. I feel that it is to our advantage to quickly resolve this issue, however we can, and I intend to take the initiative here and preempt him.¹¹

Having thus expressed enthusiasm for improving relations with China, Hirota attended meetings of the five-minister conference in October 1933. The five-minister conference (*goshō kaigi*) served as an “inner cabinet” for deciding and coordinating important government policies and consisted of the foreign, war, navy, and finance ministers in addition to the prime minister. This meeting was thus attended by War Minister Araki Sadao, Navy Minister Ōsumi Mineo, and Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo in addition to Hirota and Saitō. Over the course of the conference’s five meetings (the first on October 3), Hirota worked to check Takahashi and Araki’s hardline stance toward the Soviet Union.

A meeting of the full cabinet was then held on October 21. There, Hirota spoke about Sino-Japanese relations, espousing a vision for a new regional order:

We will bring about a state of mutual aid and cooperation between the three nations of Japan, China, and Manchukuo under the guidance of the Empire; in doing so, we will ensure permanent peace in East Asia and contribute to world peace.

On the Soviet Union, he stated that it was “of the utmost importance to prevent a clash,” even as he cautioned that “our fundamental ideological differences make it difficult to exist in harmony.” He also expressed an intention to purchase the North Manchuria Railway soon.

This was the Chinese Eastern Railway; it had been renamed the North Manchuria Railway on the grounds that, as it was now located within Manchukuo, its previous name was no longer appropriate.

The official statement released following the cabinet meeting held that “in our international relations, we will strive for the fulfillment of our policies through diplomatic means and a desire for world peace.”¹²

While Hirota had managed to check Araki’s anti-Soviet positions at the conference, this did not mean that he took the army’s Imperial Way faction (*Kōdō-ha*)—then at the height of its influence—lightly. He reached out to Lt. Col. Suzuki Teiichi through Kakumi Chio, a former foreign ministry official. Suzuki was a confidante of Araki and head of the War Ministry’s Newspaper Section. The two were in agreement over “managing the America problem” and “the issue of China,” and Hirota “affirmed” to Suzuki that there would be no non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. Hirota’s stance toward the Soviets would seem to have been irreconcilable with that of Araki and Suzuki, but he was willing to make concessions to the Imperial Way faction such as setting aside his desire for such a pact. This shows the cunningness of Hirota’s approach.¹³

Hirota’s Foreign Policy Vision—Harmony Diplomacy and “Mutual Assistance and Amity”

What was Hirota’s vision for foreign policy? The January 1934 issue of *Chūō Kōron* featured an essay by Hirota entitled “The Fundamentals of Japanese Diplomacy.” He began the essay by noting that:

At present, the primary linchpin for the advancement of the Empire's foreign policy is fostering the healthy development of Manchukuo. [...] There is an urgent need to aid in the building of Manchukuo; the fruits of our economic cooperation with that state will lay the foundation for peace in the Orient.

He also commented on China:

China is fundamentally a family-oriented country, where the civilization follows an Oriental-style hierarchical structure. Local bases are established by politicians and generals. And even when clashes and disturbances between these figures break out in certain regions, the general public acts indifferent, as if this has nothing to do with their daily lives.

From the Chinese perspective, it seems likely that it was Japan whose modernity could be called into question, given that Manchukuo had been seized by the Kwantung Army in an outburst of violence, an act that was then legitimized by Japan's recognition of Manchukuo. Even so, Hirota held that “we will see the results of cooperation between Japan, Manchukuo, and China, and thereby lay the foundation for peace in the Orient.”¹⁴

Hirota gave his first speech to the Diet as foreign minister on January 23. Speaking after Prime Minister Saitō to the House of Peers, he opened with a statement that “in obedience to the Imperial Will, I will devote all of my efforts to ‘striving for the fulfillment of our policies through diplomatic means with a desire for world peace.’”

His mention of the “Imperial Will” was a reference to the imperial rescript issued at the time of Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations; as touched on earlier, conformance to this rescript had been one of his conditions for becoming foreign minister.

He accepted the existence of Manchukuo as a *fait accompli* and made its development his first priority, but also envisioned a state of “cooperation between Japan, Manchukuo, and China.” In specifying that foreign policy would be carried out through “diplomatic means,” he was drawing a distinction between himself and the army.

He also spoke to the House of Peers about achieving “mutual assistance and amity” with China:

It is the heartfelt desire of the Imperial Government that China rapidly recover its stability and prosperity. It is our natural mission to ensure that our two nations always maintain a relationship of mutual assistance and amity and, in doing so, contribute to the peace and development of East Asia.

He also expressed his personal belief that:

should every country express themselves with sincerity and understand one another's positions, thereby manifesting the great spirit of international harmony, then there is no problem so difficult that resolving it would necessarily be an insurmountable task.¹⁵

The moderate approach put forward in this speech came to be referred to as “harmony diplomacy” (*kyōwa gaikō*) in Japan.¹⁶ He delivered a speech to the House of Representatives that same afternoon in which he voiced similar sentiments.¹⁷

Hirota's passionate arguments for “mutual assistance and amity” and “the great spirit of international harmony” were received with skepticism in the Chinese and

Soviet media. It was given positive coverage in Japanese and Western newspapers, however. A January 24 editorial in the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* appraised the speech as “reflecting the extremely ordinary and yet simultaneously reliable benchmark of a commonsense, non-flashy diplomatic approach.”¹⁸

But what did Hirota actually mean when he spoke of “international harmony?” It is unclear, but when asked at the House of Peers about Japan’s post-League diplomatic course, he answered that:

It is unfortunate that the Manchuria issue ultimately made our withdrawal from the League of Nations unavoidable, but [...] I believe that diplomacy should be conducted with a philosophy of wanting to improve goodwill with every nation. Put briefly, I feel that our foreign policy should be advanced in a way that embraces international harmony.¹⁹

He thus openly acknowledged that Japan’s withdrawal from the League had been “unfortunate” and again emphasized “international harmony.” Hirota’s “harmony diplomacy” was a quiet rejection of Uchida’s “scorched earth diplomacy” and an attempt to return Japanese foreign policy to its prior track of cooperating with the other powers. “Harmony diplomacy” and “international harmony” would be Hirota’s slogans for advancing his diplomatic policy.

In line with these goals, he exchanged messages of friendship and goodwill with British Foreign Secretary Simon and US Secretary of State Hull from January to March 1934. Touching upon the old Anglo-Japanese alliance, he wrote of Japan’s “cooperative spirit” with Britain in a letter to Simon.²⁰ US Ambassador Grew viewed Hirota as following in the footsteps of Shidehara.²¹

As mentioned earlier, Hirota’s foreign policy differed from that of Shidehara, however. He rejected Shidehara’s emphasis on cooperation with American and Britain and incorporated the idea of “Sino-Japanese-Manchukuoan cooperation” into his diplomatic vision. But although he embraced the idea of a regional order in Asia, he was not entirely focused on pan-Asianism. Even as he sought to have powers like the Soviet Union and Germany grant recognition to Manchukuo (in addition to China’s existing *de facto* recognition), he also tried to improve relations with American and Britain. This was the dual-nature and depth of Hirota Diplomacy.

This approach meant that the Western business world (such as engineering firms in the United States) was enthusiastic about the potential for participation in Manchukuo and wanted to send mission to observe local conditions there. Hirota told Manchukuo to accommodate these missions and to provide “every consideration” to the powers’ business ventures in the country.²² While the powers continued to hold to the principle of the Open Door in Manchuria, they seemed to be drawing closer to providing *de facto* recognition of Manchukuo.

But as Manchukuo itself viewed the presence of Western businesses negatively, not much progress was made in this area. Germany, Italy, and Spain would all formally recognize Manchukuo, but not until Hirota’s second term as foreign minister (i.e., after the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War).

Hirota’s diplomatic course conformed to the demands of the period. Which is to say, while it took the existence of Manchukuo as a given, it recognized the need for Japan to rebuild its relations with the other powers rather than exacerbate the

isolation that had come from its withdrawal from the League. And no one was more aware than Hirota of how difficult this would be to achieve. After all, he was pursuing contradictory goals: making Manchukuo's development his first priority while also attempting to establish a relationship of "mutual assistance and amity" with China, and seeking to have the Western powers both grant recognition to Manchukuo and maintain the Open Door.

As such, Hirota's foreign policy depended on maintaining a delicate balance between Manchukuo, China, and the West, with Japan's fate on the line. And he was of course aware of this. However, just as he was embarking on this diplomatic course, the Amō Statement would expose just how fragile his position was.

Hirota's First Mistake: The Amō Statement

It was 2 p.m. on April 17, 1934. Amō Eiji, director of the foreign ministry's Information Department, issued the following statement to the "Kasumi Club" (the foreign ministry press corps):

Japan is determined to fulfill its mission of preserving peace and order in East Asia. [...] Should China take steps contrary to peace in East Asia, attempt to use other countries to exclude Japan, or adopt the xenophobic tactic of "playing one barbarian against another," then Japan will have no choice but to oppose this.²³

The uncompromising nature of the statement stood in stark contrast to Amō, who read from a piece of paper in a faltering voice. The statement did not spare the Western powers its boldness, either:

The provision of arms, military aircraft, or the like, the dispatch of military instructors, or the provision of political loans would clearly alienate relations between China and Japan and other countries and produce results contrary to the preservation of peace and order in the Far East. Japan would thus be unable to ignore any such action.

This statement called for the removal of all of the Western powers' influence in China; Japan would preserve order in East Asia by itself.

The Amō Statement received wide coverage both at home and abroad, with the West protesting that it was an attempt to declare a Monroe Doctrine for Asia. Hirota, who was of course foreign minister, had aimed for a moderate China policy in cooperation with the West; he saw the contents of the statement as differing only slightly from his own thoughts, and he was surprised at the uproar it caused.

Pressed for an explanation, Hirota attempted to placate Grew and others by saying that "Japan has no intention of interfering with the interests of any third party in China." Britain, having broken the Japanese diplomatic cables, knew that the Amō Statement reflected the contents of an earlier telegram sent by Hirota rather than Amō's own personal views.²⁴

For Hirota, whose foreign policy had been going passably well so far, the Amō Statement represented the first major misstep. Why had he been unable to fully realize how it would be perceived overseas? He had served as deputy director of the

Information Department earlier in his career and should have been familiar with how to use information.

The truth is, Vice-Minister Shigemitsu played a key role in the statement. Nine years younger than Hirota, he had a tendency to push exclusionary policies toward China and was the leading voice on China policy within the ministry at the time that Hirota became foreign minister. He was even more sensitive than Hirota when it came to interference by the West in China, and this was reflected in the statement that Amō gave.

The Reality of the Amō Statement

I would like to take a deeper look at the Amō Statement, focusing on the relationship between Hirota and Shigemitsu as I do.

The statement read by Amō appears essentially in full in Telegram No. 109 to Minister to China Ariyoshi Akira. Sent on April 13 in Hirota's name, this telegram was written by Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Morishima. As touched on earlier, Morishima was a graduate of the Shūyūkan, and it had been Hirota who had convinced him to join the foreign ministry. But it had been Shigemitsu, not Hirota, who had had Morishima write the telegram. In other words, it was Shigemitsu, not Hirota, who had a grasp on China policy within the ministry.²⁵

Shigemitsu had been in contact with Morishima since his time as Minister to China, going through his subordinate Horiuchi Tateki.²⁶ Since becoming vice-minister, he had increased his level of coordination with Morishima in a way that excluded Hirota.

According to Morishima:

The vice-minister did not care for the draft telegram I had written, and he scolded me and made me rewrite it twice. [...] After finally meeting his approval, Asian Affairs Director Kuwashima and Vice-Minister Shigemitsu signed off on it, and I brought it to Minister Hirota's office. The minister made a strange face, but I got his signature and immediately took it to the Telegraph Section and sent it.

Telegram No. 109—the future Amō Statement—may have been officially sent in Hirota's name but, given the context, it can be considered Shigemitsu's.

Morishima described the working relationship between Hirota and Shigemitsu as follows:

Shigemitsu was not a particularly obedient vice-minister while serving under Foreign Minister Hirota and tended to act independently on China policy. But, either due to cunning or magnanimity, Hirota did not seem to interfere much with Shigemitsu's unique China policy.

While Hirota was foreign minister, when it came to China policy—something that Hirota was supposedly emphasizing in his diplomacy—actual authority in the ministry was held by Vice-Minister Shigemitsu. And it was thus Shigemitsu's

more uncompromising positions that were unexpectedly made public as the Amō Statement.²⁷

Hirota had been interested in Sino-Japanese relations ever since his student days, and China was also the first country that he was posted to by the foreign ministry. But that had been twenty-five years earlier, when the Qing Dynasty still ruled. By contrast, Shigemitsu had previously served as Minister to China and consul-general in Shanghai. During his time in the ministry, Hirota's specialty had become the Soviet Union; he could not be considered a China expert in comparison to Shigemitsu and Morishima. He had long had a tendency to delegate day-to-day work to his subordinates (ever since his time as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau), and that continued as foreign minister; he left much of the work of China policy to Shigemitsu and Morishima.

Shigemitsu described his role thusly:

As vice-minister, I played the central role in devising how the foreign ministry would respond to Chinese and Manchurian issues. In light of my experience with China, the foreign minister allowed me a high degree of discretion.²⁸

Hirota may have kept his distance from the Shidehara faction, but that did not mean that he had tried to restrain members of the reformist faction like Shigemitsu.

What the Amō Statement Revealed

After the Amō Statement was published in the media on April 18, it was continually criticized at meetings of the foreign ministry leadership. Work in the ministry is highly compartmentalized, and many bureau and department heads only learned of the statement after it had been made public. When European and Asian Affairs Director Tōgō criticized its “extremeness” as “provoking unnecessary discord with the signatories of the Nine-Power Treaty,” Hirota cowardly responded that “it was released without my having any knowledge; I ask that you convey that fact to the Western ambassadors when asked.”²⁹

Hirota did not hold Shigemitsu and Morishima responsible for the backlash, however. According to Amō's diary, when he approached Hirota about resigning, “I was told that it was a collective matter.” That is, Hirota shielded Amō by saying that it was a matter of collective responsibility rather than making him a scapegoat.³⁰

This series of events concerning the Amō Statement is quite interesting as it provides a glimpse into the personal connections and policymaking process within the foreign ministry of this period. Hirota had lost control over China policy to Shigemitsu but maintained a good relationship with Tōgō. For his part, Tōgō did not get on well with either Shigemitsu or Amō. And, while Amō had been Hirota's subordinate while he was ambassador to the Soviet Union as well, he was closer to the younger Shigemitsu than Hirota. He was also—in the view of the newspaper reporters in the press corps—not the kind of person to issue such a statement on his own initiative.³¹

The Information Department, the group to have issued the Amō Statement in the first place, was not deeply involved in the ministry's policymaking. There was a tendency to keep sensitive information away from the department to prevent it from leaking to the press. There had also been an incident where, shortly after the Manchurian Incident, then-Information Department Director Shiratori Toshio had released a hardline statement that went against the intentions of Foreign Minister Shidehara. In this case, the Amō Statement was based on a diplomatic cable, but it was unanticipated by Hirota and a damaging piece of public messaging.³²

The Amō Statement could have been a good opportunity for reexamining the ministry's public diplomacy. But Hirota did not undertake any fundamental reforms. Amō remained in place and would in fact stay there until April 1937. The statement had no long-standing negative effect on his career; indeed, he would ultimately rise to the position of vice-minister shortly before the beginning of the Pacific War. The question of who, exactly, was responsible for the Amō Statement was left vague.

The Okada Government—Negotiations with Britain, the United States, and the USSR

On July 3, 1934, the Saitō government resigned en masse in response to the Teijin Incident—a corruption scandal involving the Teijin Artificial Silk Company. When Okada Keisuke, a member of the navy's moderate faction, was chosen as the new prime minister, Hirota stayed on as foreign minister.

On the same day as the government's fall, Hirota proposed an Anglo-American-Japanese non-aggression pact to the newly-appointed British ambassador, Robert Clive. The idea for the pact had been sparked by the naval disarmament negotiations ongoing in London at the time.

The British were receptive to the idea, but Hirota's effort never amounted to anything. In his instructions to Ambassador to Britain Matsudaira on the pact, he had told him that "it is vital that you take adequate care in preventing any restrictions on our position in East Asia." Despite being the one who had proposed the pact, he was unwilling to allow it to limit Japanese policy toward China.³³

A pressing issue for Japan at this point was convincing the Soviet Union to sell the North Manchuria Railway; Hirota had been involved in this since his time as ambassador, and it is what he had been focusing on at the time of the formation of the Okada government. As Soviet policy was his greatest specialty, he repeatedly met with Soviet Ambassador Yurenev, serving as an intermediary between Manchukuo and the Soviets. As the two sides were not at all close on the purchase price, the negotiations did not go smoothly.³⁴

Despite the poor state of the negotiations, Hirota indicated to the Diet on November 30 that he expected an agreement on the railway soon. But his comment concerning the naval disarmament talks in the speech is more interesting: "I am calling for the establishment of a common maximum level on military strength for the participating

countries, and the abandonment of the traditional focus on ratios.”³⁵ This was interpreted by the United States as a Japanese decision to annul the Washington Naval Treaty.³⁶ And the Okada government had in fact decided to do just that on September 7.³⁷

Manchukuo and the Soviet Union finally reached an agreement on the transfer of the North Manchuria Railway on March 23, 1935. Hirota had overseen the negotiations, and the formal signing of the agreement was held at his official residence. In addition to paying 140 million yen to the Soviet Union, Manchukuo would also cover the severance pay for the railway’s Soviet employees. Manchukuo’s payments would be guaranteed by the Japanese government. The negotiations had stretched out for twenty-one months, but this positive result was clearly an achievement for Hirota.

At the signing ceremony, Hirota lauded Ambassador Yurenev and Manchukuoan Minister to Japan Ding Shiyuan, declaring the occasion “a matter worthy of celebration for its contribution to the advancement of peace in both East Asia and the world.” Hirota’s audience included members of the foreign ministry leadership such as Shigemitsu, Kurisu, Tōgō, Kuwashima, Kuriyama, and Amō. The *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* gave the event wide coverage, stating that the agreement would “serve as a cornerstone for goodwill between Japan, Russia, and Manchukuo.” A beaming Hirota can be seen in the article’s photograph.³⁸

He reported on the successful negotiations to both houses of the Diet on March 2 and informed them that all railways in Manchukuo (including the North Manchuria Railway) would be placed under Mantetsu. The response in the House of Representatives was particularly notable; his proud statement that “all railways in Manchuria are being placed under unified management” was met with thunderous applause.³⁹

There can be no doubt that Hirota felt a surge of pride at this moment. In his first speech to the Diet, he had spoken of “fulfilling our policies through diplomatic means,” and he had now done just that to overwhelming approval. It was a tour de force for Hirota, the Soviet expert who preached for “harmony diplomacy,” and the easing of tensions with the Soviet Union can be regarded as the greatest accomplishment of his first term as foreign minister.

He had been supported during the negotiations by Tōgō and European and Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Nishi Haruhiko. Not only was Hirota enthusiastic about Soviet policy, but he and Tōgō worked very well together. When he had been director of the European and American Affairs Bureau, Tōgō had been director of its 1st section (which oversaw the Soviet Union), and the two men had collaborated on establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviets. For his part, Nishi knew Ōhashi Chūichi, vice-minister of the Manchukuoan foreign ministry and Manchukuo’s representative in the negotiations, as they had both joined the Japanese foreign ministry in the same year. The support of Tōgō and Nishi thus allowed Hirota to smoothly oversee the negotiations.⁴⁰

On March 2, Hirota even referenced the possibility of purchasing northern Sakhalin from the USSR to the House of Representatives committee on drafting the Law on Regulating Fishing in the North Seas. While discussing fishing issues, he mentioned that “there had been discussion of purchasing northern Sakhalin” prior

to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviets, and that “I believe it would be good to raise the issue again, should such discussions be able to be held amiably between Japan and Russia.”

Hirota’s foreign policy—harmony diplomacy—was approaching the height of its success.⁴¹ He took the momentum he had gained from the negotiations with the Soviet Union and now turned it toward improving relations with China.

“There Will Absolutely not Be a War While I Am in Office.”

The Diet went back into session on January 22, 1935. At ten o’clock that morning, Hirota rose to the podium at the House of Peers, following Prime Minister Okada, and gave a speech in which he examined the current state of Sino-Japanese relations:

The Imperial Government sincerely hopes that China recovers its stability as quickly as possible, awakens to the general situation in East Asia, and meets the Empire’s earnestly held expectations. As a good neighbor, and in light of our status as a force for stability in East Asia, our country’s policy is to work ever harder to make this a reality.⁴²

This speech, in which Hirota invoked Sino-Japanese goodwill and peace in East Asia, received applause, something that was a rare occurrence in the House of Peers.⁴³

Three days later, Hirota attended the January 25 session of the House of Representatives with the rest of the cabinet. There, Diet Member Ashida Hitoshi peppered him with questions on immigration to Brazil, trade policy, “China’s anti-Japanese policies,” and “the strength of the colossal Soviet Far Eastern Army.” He demanded answers from the Okada government, declaring, “I believe that [the government’s] lack of direction has resulted in [Japan’s] diplomatic isolation, endangering the future of our nation [applause.]”

This exchange occurred during a period when the Seiyūkai was stepping up its attacks against the Okada government. Prior to joining the Seiyūkai and going into politics, Ashida had been a foreign ministry official, so his words on foreign policy held weight. Even so, Hirota kept his composure and once Ashida had finally finished, he began parrying the attacks, opening with a comment that “Well, we can certainly tell you have a diplomatic background.” Laughter and jeers came from the chamber.

Uncowed by the agitated legislators, Hirota yelled that they should “Shut up and listen!” He had obviously gained confidence from his successful speech of a few days earlier, and he revealed that Ashida had visited him prior to his departure from the foreign ministry to discuss his going into politics. He flattered Ashida, noting that “I am painfully aware of how regrettable it is for the future of diplomacy when a skilled diplomat like Ashida decides to leave the foreign ministry.”

After speaking at length on China, Manchukuo, and the Soviet Union among other topics, he concluded his remarks with a declaration that “I can say with confidence that there will absolutely not be a war while I am in office.”⁴⁴ The way he spoke radiated experience in a way that made it difficult to believe that he came from the

bureaucracy. Ashida was in his third year in the Diet, but Hirota came across as the better public speaker.

One newspaper's coverage of the debate featured the headline "Absolutely No War While I'm in Office—Displays Frankness and Conviction to Ashida's Questions on Foreign Policy" over a picture of Hirota.⁴⁵ The clash between the two former diplomats ended decisively in Hirota's favor. Hirota had also begun to regain control over China policy from Shigemitsu by this time.

China's Pro-Japanese Faction and "Sino-Japanese Partnership"

The January 22 speech in which Hirota had invoked Sino-Japanese goodwill was accurately conveyed to the Chinese leadership, including Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission Chiang Kai-shek and Premier Wang Jingwei (who was also serving as foreign minister). Chiang welcomed the speech, telling Minister to China Ariyoshi Akira that it "shows a good understanding of China's position." He issued a statement in response calling for China and Japan to be good neighbors. Huang Fu, chairman of the Political Affairs Committee in Beijing, also had high hopes for Hirota. This committee held jurisdiction over five provinces including Hebei, as well as over the cities of Beijing (the contemporary name for Beijing) and Qingdao.

Hirota had called for "Sino-Japanese partnership," but who were the Chinese leaders likely to answer that call? Wang Jingwei and Huang Fu had both studied in Japan (Wang at Hosei University and Huang at Tokyo Shinbu Gakkō), and they were seen as the most prominent figures belonging to the pro-Japanese faction. As mentioned, Wang also held powerful positions in the Nationalist government.

Wang's right-hand man was Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Tang Youren. Tang had studied at Keio University in Tokyo and held the third-highest position in the Chinese foreign ministry. Hirota viewed Wang and Tang as the likely partners for his efforts at cooperation. By contrast, Finance Minister Kong Xiangxi, Governor of the Central Bank of China Song Ziwen, and President of the Legislative Yuan Sun Ke were seen as belonging to the pro-Western faction.

Hirota met with Wang Chonghui, who had been serving as a judge on the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague, on February 26 as he was passing through Japan on his way home. When Wang spoke of improving Sino-Japanese relations and abolishing the unequal treaties, Hirota agreed in principle. He also responded positively to Wang's suggestion that the two countries' legations be elevated to the status of embassy, telling Wang that "I hope to exchange ambassadors if our countries' friendly relations improve further."⁴⁶

At the time, Japan only had embassies in ten countries: Britain, France, Italy, the United States, Germany, Belgium, Brazil, Turkey, the Soviet Union, and Manchukuo. Making China the eleventh would mean recognizing it as a major power and likely

also serve as a symbol of “Sino-Japanese partnership.” Hirota took major steps toward achieving this goal.

The partnership envisioned by Hirota involved establishing close political and economic ties between the two countries in cooperation with pro-Japanese Chinese like Wang Jingwei. These efforts were to be kept entirely separate from the Japanese army and were only barely made possible by ignoring the existence of Manchukuo for the time being. It cannot be denied that these restrictions naturally limited any political ties, making the economic aspects all the more key.

Led by Hirota, the foreign ministry leadership thus explored cooperative economic efforts (although these were conditioned on a Chinese crackdown on anti-Japanese activities). This push was widely reported in Japanese newspapers, which spoke of the ministry’s “intention to embark on the coordination of Sino-Japanese economics ties.”

Specific policies including bringing groups of Chinese businessmen to Japan to observe Japanese industry, providing agricultural technology to increase the production of cotton and other crops, the introduction of a barter system to foster trade, and the provision of two hundred million yen in credit to Shanghai to support the Chinese financial world.⁴⁷

Media coverage of the efforts reached a fever pitch, to the extent that Minister to China Ariyoshi advised that Hirota place restrictions on the report so as not to give the Chinese “the impression that we had been utterly exhausted by the anti-Japanese movement and were desperate for economic activities between our countries.”⁴⁸ This is the degree to which there were voices inside and outside of Japan calling for Hirota to achieve a breakthrough and overcome the closed-off state of Sino-Japanese relations.

The economic assistance being proposed by Hirota and other Japanese leaders was not unconditional; it was predicated on a Chinese crackdown on the anti-Japanese movement. Even so, some progress was made in increasing trade and business exchanges. Hirota’s vision for a political and economic “Sino-Japanese partnership” was seeming quite realistic.

Hirota’s Diplomatic Style

Still, it is important to reestablish that Hirota was not entirely focused on pan-Asianism. On April 16, 1935, he met with Emil Schreiber, publisher of the French newspaper *Les Echos*. When asked if he was pursuing a policy of “Asia for the Asians,” Hirota replied that “I believe that diplomacy means dealing with things in accordance with reality rather than being beholden to ideas that are vague in their actual meaning.” This was a denial that he was calling for pan-Asianism. And when asked about seeking closer ties to Germany, he answered that “Japan has no intention of becoming tied to any European nation in particular.”⁴⁹

The interview is quite interesting in that it shows Hirota’s belief that “diplomacy means dealing with things in accordance with reality.” His diplomatic style did not

come from any particular ideology or convictions. But while that gave him flexibility and made him able to respond to actual conditions, it also made his positions amorphous and susceptible to the trends of the times. And that tendency to be carried along by whatever the current trend was made it difficult for him to remain fixed in a particular direction. Hirota differed from both Shidehara and Shigemitsu in this respect; Shidehara because he held firm to his belief in cooperation with Britain and America, and Shigemitsu due to his preference for logical reason.

Even so, the prospects for Sino-Japanese relations looked brighter in the first half of 1935 than they had at any other point between the Manchurian Incident and the Pacific War. And the elevation of the countries' legations to the status of embassies would be the pinnacle of these improved relations.

The Pinnacle of Hirota Diplomacy—Establishing Embassies

China had long wanted to elevate the status of its diplomatic representation in Japan from a legation to an embassy. However, this was opposed by members of the Japanese army like Maj. Gen. Isogai Rensuke, the military attaché to the Japanese legation, who felt that while China occasionally adopted pro-Japanese stances, these were counterfeit.

Despite the army opposition, Hirota received approval for an exchange of ambassadors at the May 7 cabinet meeting. He had privately reported to the Emperor the day before. Under the contemporary system, ambassadors were personally appointed by the Emperor and were higher in status than the vice-minister of foreign affairs. The only other direct Imperial appointments were positions such as prime minister, ministers of state, generals and admirals, and the governor-general of Korea.

Approval in hand, Hirota had Nanjing Consul-General Suma Yakichirō report to Wang Jingwei, telling him that:

The Chinese have previously expressed a keen desire [to have our diplomatic relationship upgraded]. Due to the importance with which we view the Sino-Japanese relationship, especially in light of the recent developments between us, it has been decided to elevate the status of the Imperial legation in China.

He then went further, telling Suma that he “hoped to convince the other major countries involved in China such as Britain, America, and France to similarly elevate” their legations. Britain, America, France, and Germany all expressed support for Hirota’s action. Foreign nations upgrading their legations to embassies provided a boost to China’s international status.⁵⁰ This was a moment where Hirota’s vision of improving relations with Britain and America while simultaneously furthering the “Sino-Japanese partnership” achieved a success.

When Suma informed Wang of the action:

Wang Jingwei cried in happiness, and when it came time for me to leave, he and Vice-Minister Tang Youren actually accompanied me all the way to the car and closed its door himself. Interpreter Shimizu Tōzō and I deeply appreciated the gesture.

Wang and Tang, the men so happy by the move, were of course the pro-Japanese leaders who Hirota envisioned as serving as his partners.⁵¹

When the legation was formally elevated on May 17, a Nationalist government foreign ministry spokesman announced that “We are deeply grateful for the efforts and sincerity of Foreign Minister Hirota as they have brought about a groundbreaking improvement in Sino-Japanese relations.”⁵² Hirota must have felt extremely gratified by the positive Chinese reaction.

It had been Hirota who had pushed the move to establish embassies forward; not even East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Kuwashima had been kept fully informed on the matter. When Hirota submitted papers on the move at the cabinet meeting, they had been prepared by his secretary. He saw the elevation of diplomatic status as a milestone for Sino-Japanese cooperation. He had had dreams about the Asian mainland since childhood, and he was now on the verge of achieving friendship with China. His foreign policy was approaching its high-water mark.

But the establishment of embassies also brought with it a danger that threatened to bring down Hirota’s diplomatic efforts. Army officers were furious at not having been properly consulted on the move in advance, and some went so far as to visit the foreign ministry and openly state that the army would block any future initiatives by Hirota. The army had considered any action on embassies to be premature. It was concerned that, should ambassadors be exchanged, then the foreign ministry would be able to carry out negotiations with China outside the influence of local Japanese army officers. In other words, it turned the embassy issue into one that “involved the dignity of the army.” The Army general staff was particularly critical.

Hirota had likely considered the upgrade to embassy to have been an act of goodwill. But goodwill does not always produce positive results. While this was the highpoint of Hirota’s “Sino-Japanese partnership,” it also marked the beginning of a series of reversals for his foreign policy brought about by his conflict with the army. According to East Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Morishima, “Hirota did not fully realize that ‘policy towards China was also policy towards the army.’” If true, then the army’s strategy to create a buffer zone in northern China would soon wake him up to that fact.⁵³

The Army Backlash—The North China Separation Strategy

The decision to elevate Japan’s legation in China to an embassy had the effect of increasing the clandestine efforts of Japanese army officers station in China. Col. Sakai Takashi, Chief of Staff for the China Garrison Army singled out Hirota in his criticism of the move, calling it “utterly outrageous.” He was the second-highest ranking officer in the China Garrison Army behind its commander Maj. Gen. Umezu Yoshijirō.

In Sakai’s view, whereas Uchida Kōsai, the previous foreign minister, had been determined to aid in the development of Manchukuo, by exchanging ambassadors

with China—“Manchukuo’s enemy”—Hirota had called into question “just who exactly he is attempted to help, Manchukuo or the Nanjing government.”

While Hirota had spoken publicly of a “Sino-Manchukuoan-Japanese partnership,” the army felt that he had overemphasized the role of China over that of Manchukuo. Sakai’s criticism reached the foreign ministry through Army Deputy Chief of Staff Sugiyama Hajime and would doubtlessly have placed significant pressure on Hirota.

To make matters worse, Sakai and the other officers angry at Hirota embarked on the hardline policy of attempting to remove the Nationalist government’s influence from northern China. This was known as the North China Separation Strategy (*kahoku bunri kōsaku*) and became public in June 1935 through the He-Umezu and Qin-Doihara agreements.

With the He-Umezu Agreement, the China Garrison Army forced the Chinese army out of Hebei Province. As mentioned earlier, Umezu was commander of the China Garrison Army; He Yingqin was deputy chairman of the Beiping National Military Council. Umezu was in Xinjing at this time, however, and it was none other than Sakai who actually carried out the negotiations. The Qin-Doihara Agreement (named after Maj. Gen. Doihara Kenji, head of the Fengtian Secret Service, and Qin Dechun, deputy governor of Chahar Province) similarly saw Song Zheyuan’s forces withdraw from Chahar.

The proximate cause for the He-Umezu Agreement was the murder of two Chinese newspaper heads seen as pro-Japanese in the Japanese concession in Tianjin. Sakai visited He in Beiping and demanded that the KMT and Chinese Central Army withdraw from Hebei and that Hebei Governor Yu Xuezhong and other officials be dismissed.

Ambassador Jiang Zuobin asked Hirota to assist in resolving the issue. Sakai’s demands were clearly excessive, and the Chinese needed Hirota’s help. But after having East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Kuwashima consult on the matter with the army, Hirota unexpectedly informed the Chinese that “it would be inappropriate to treat this as a diplomatic negotiation as it is primarily a military matter related to a ceasefire agreement.”

Under pressure from the army, Hirota indicated that the foreign ministry would not be getting involved and that the Chinese should discuss things with the Japanese army officers stationed in China. This decision would have placed the pro-Japanese figures in the Nationalist government like Wang and Tang into a difficult position, and it is not hard to imagine that they would have seen it as a betrayal. The foreign ministry even went so far as to agree to provide the Japanese army with “‘moral support’ from the side” in its negotiations with China. Left with no other choice, He agreed to all of Sakai’s demands.⁵⁴

At the time, Hirota told Harada Kumao that “I can’t make any protests as it involves the supreme command [of the Emperor].”⁵⁵ As the army was nominally under the direct command of the Emperor, it had adopted a tactic during this period of equating any criticism of its actions to criticism of the Emperor.

It has to be admitted that, when faced with this crisis in northern China, Hirota responded passively rather than actively attempting to maintain his ministry’s control

over Japanese foreign policy. This effected the power balance between the foreign ministry and army in northern China, and Hirota's foreign policy began to decline. This situation should have resulted in Hirota redoubling his efforts for a "Sino-Japanese partnership."

Hirota's Three Principles and the Disillusionment of the Pro-Japanese Chinese

The above-described actions by the Japanese army led to a sense of impending crisis within the Nationalist government. Hoping to stave off any further worsening of relations, pro-Japanese figures like Wang and Tang began lobbying the Japanese government.

Acting on Wang's behalf, Tang met with Ambassador to China Ariyoshi on June 17 and proposed strengthening the two countries' economic ties. Tang wanted to "use cooperation in economic areas (customs, debt restructuring, etc.) as a basis for arrangements for collaboration in political areas as well (preventing the spread of communism, cracking down on disloyal Koreans, etc.)."

Despite the Japanese army's ongoing North China separation strategy, China's pro-Japanese faction did not abandon attempts to cooperate with Japan. Indeed, they were nimbler than Hirota in trying to save the "Sino-Japanese partnership." Meanwhile, Shigemitsu and Morishima were working under Hirota to formulate a new Japanese basic policy for China.

Hirota met with Ambassador Jiang several times from June to September about making the "Sino-Japanese partnership" a reality. China proposed three principles which, in addition to the more boilerplate endorsements of the peaceful resolution of the issues between China and Japan and equality in their relations, included a concession to Japan: the inclusion of language on the suppression of the anti-Japanese movement. Chiang Kai-shek also told Hirota through Jiang that, while China would not recognize Manchukuo, it would "let the matter lie" and not ask that Japan withdraw its recognition. This likely represented as far as Chiang was willing to go.

Hirota was not willing to accept the three principles put forward by Jiang, however, and chose to adopt the policy drawn up by Shigemitsu and Morishima instead. This in turn became known as Hirota's Three Principles (see in full in Table 4.1).

These principles were:

1. China was to "carry out a thorough crackdown on anti-Japanese activities," "break away from its policy of dependence on the West," and "adopt a policy of goodwill towards Japan."
2. While Japan would continue to seek formal Chinese recognition of Manchukuo, for the time being China was to grant "de facto recognition of Manchukuo's independence" and undertake "economic and cultural cooperation with Manchukuo in the north China region."

Table 4.1. Hirota's three principles

1	The Chinese are to carry out a thorough crackdown on anti-Japanese activities. They will adopt a policy of goodwill towards Japan and break away from their policy of dependence on the West. It will put these policies into actual effect and cooperate with the Empire on more concrete matters
2	While the Chinese will need to formally recognize Manchukuo eventually, for the time being they are not only to grant de facto recognition of Manchukuo's independence and cease their anti-Manchukuoan policies, they are to undertake economic and cultural cooperation with Manchukuo, at least in those regions bordering Manchukuo
3	As the communist threat coming from Outer Mongolia and other regions represents a common threat to the three nations of Japan, China, and Manchukuo, the Chinese are to cooperate with various facilities as desired by us in areas bordering Outer Mongolia so as to deal with this threat

Source Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Nihon Gaikō Nenpyō Nami Shuyō Bunsho* [Chronology and Major Papers on Japanese Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1965)

- China was to “cooperate with various facilities as desired by us” in “areas bordering Outer Mongolia” so as to deal with “the communist threat coming from Outer Mongolia and other regions.”

Hirota, War Minister Kawashima Yoshiyuki, and Navy Minister Ōsumi Mineo agreed to the Three Principles on October 4; Prime Minister Okada and Finance Minister Takahashi subsequently gave their approval as well.

In putting the principles forward to Ambassador Jiang on October 21, Hirota emphasized the presence of the communist threat and stated that “Japan is always keeping an eye on the peace and development of the Orient.” The negotiations immediately broke down. As the Three Principles consisted entirely of demands of China, it should have been obvious that they would be rejected. The only thing that had made “Sino-Japanese partnership” barely seem possible had been a willingness to ignore the existence of Manchukuo; seeking formal Chinese recognition was a nonstarter.

From the Chinese perspective, agreeing to the Three Principles gained them nothing; they could not possibly serve as a basic policy for a partnership with Japan. They were in marked contrast with the three principles proposed by China that summer, and those had already included the suppression of the anti-Japanese movement as a concession to Japan. It is easy to understand the disillusionment felt by pro-Japanese figures like Wang and Tang who had placed their hopes in Hirota. Chinese feelings toward Japan worsened, and the position of the pro-Japanese faction was threatened.

The decline of the pro-Japanese faction was hastened when China implemented a monetary reform. In November, the Nationalist government abandoned the silver standard, moving to a managed currency. The change had been pushed by Finance Minister Kong Xiangxi (a member of the pro-Western faction) and was supported by Britain. Hirota distanced himself from the act, however, an example of how Shigemitsu's anti-British tendencies could restrict Hirota's China policy. The lack

of Japanese support meant that the implementation of the reform gave a boost to the pro-Western faction and dealt a blow to the pro-Japanese one.

To make matters worse, Wang Jingwei was shot in Nanjing in November and resigned as premier and foreign minister. Huang Fu, another promising pro-Japanese figure, had already retired. Tang Youren, the last major remaining Chinese supporter of Japan, complained to Nanjing Consul-General Suma that he was “completely disheartened” and that “the pro-Japanese faction is nearly ruined.” Tang himself would be shot and killed in Shanghai on December 25.⁵⁶

The “Sino-Japanese partnership” hoped for by Hirota and Wang met a tragic end. And it has to be acknowledged that Hirota’s rigid Three Principles were one factor in the decline of the pro-Japanese faction in China.

Compromising with the Military

What led to this result? It has already been argued that the fact that Hirota’s Three Principles consisted solely of demands of China meant that any negotiations with China would be deadlocked from the very beginning. Hirota would be questioned about the Three Principles prior to the Tokyo Trials, and I would like to use those statements to take a deeper look at his intentions.

According to the record of his interrogation, he believed that “the Manchurian Incident had become a cancer in Sino-Japanese relations,” but that he had promoted the trade of grain between Manchukuo and northern China as “things between Manchukuo and China could be improved through a trade agreement.” Of the elements that made up the Three Principles, he placed more emphasis on an economic “Sino-Manchukuoan-Japanese partnership” than on escaping dependence on the West, the recognition of Manchukuo, or the joint defense against communism.⁵⁷

That the Three Principles had been so uncompromising had been due to the foreign ministry paying consideration to the army. This was the result of negotiations between East Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Morishima Gorō and Military Affairs Section Director Hashimoto Gun of the War Ministry, who had the backing of Military Affairs Bureau Director Nagata Tetsuzan. Nagata was a central figure in the Control faction (Tōsei-ha), which had replaced the Imperial Way faction as the dominant faction in the army.

According to Morishima, the foreign ministry and the army had been at odds over the fate of China; the foreign ministry held that China should be unified around Chiang Kai-shek, while the army felt that China should be split up. Morishima submitted a compromise draft, which then led to a counterproposal from the military and ultimate agreement after more negotiation. The foreign ministry’s intention was that the Three Principles would help restrain efforts by army officers stationed in China to split up the country.

However, Nagata was assassinated on August 12, 1935 by Lt. Col. Aizawa Saburō, a member of the Imperial Way faction. With the loss of this centripetal force in the army leadership, officers in China were able to act as they pleased and ignore the

Three Principles.⁵⁸ Hirota criticized the Imperial Way faction in the wake of the assassination:

Generals Masaki and Araki are seen as the leaders of the Imperial Way faction. In essence, they pander to the disgruntled elements who make up a large portion of the army. And [rather than placate them] by doing so, they actually make them a disruptive factor and undermine control.⁵⁹

Qingdao Deputy Consul-General Tajiri Akiyoshi (a former East Asian Affairs Bureau 2nd Section director) wrote harshly in his memoirs about the Three Principles and how they were a compromise with the army. He was particularly critical of the third principle calling for a united front against communism, noting that “it contained a hidden demand that the Japanese army be permitted to station forces south of the Great Wall for use against communism.” He argued that:

Hirota’s Three Principles contained no concessions [to China]; they were domestic Japanese principles written as a compromise between the army and the government. They were in no way international principles based on Sino-Japanese friendship or managing our diplomatic relations.

In other words, Tajiri believed that while the Three Principles appeared to advocate for international cooperation in the defense against communism, in truth they were nothing more than a domestic compromise with the military, and that is why they failed to act as a check against army officers in China.⁶⁰

As mentioned earlier, the foreign, war, and navy ministries had approved the Three Principles on October 4. Masaki Jinzaburō (a member of the Supreme War Council and one of the Imperial Way faction leaders criticized in Hirota’s quote above) received an explanation of the principles from War Minister Kawashima the following day and wrote in his diary that:

Each ministry continues to conceal its true intentions, instead engaging in temporary and stopgap agreements. There will therefore be no change in the fact that every incident leads to interministerial conflict.

As lamented by Masaki, the Three Principles were indeed an attempt to please everyone.⁶¹

To summarize the above, Hirota had worked to achieve a “Sino-Japanese partnership” centered around economic ties and positive relations with members of China’s pro-Japanese faction like Wang Jingwei. The pinnacle of these efforts was the exchange of ambassadors between the two countries. However, this act also led Japanese army officers in China to embark on their scheme to split off northern China. Hirota then sought to incorporate the army’s desires into his Three Principles, which caused negotiations with China to break down and invited the downfall of the pro-Japanese faction there.

Hirota’s diplomatic efforts then received an additional blow as the army renewed its efforts in northern China.

The Transformation of Hirota Diplomacy—The 2nd North China Separation Strategy

The next stage in the effort to separate northern China was the establishment of puppet states there. On November 25, Doihara Kenji, the head of the Fengtian Secret Service, and others created the East Hebei Autonomous Anti-Communist Committee in Tongzhou, Hebei Province. This was a puppet government under the politician Yin Rugeng, who had previously gone into exile in Japan. It was renamed the East Hebei Autonomous Anti-Communist Government the following month. The creation of this puppet government was clearly part of local Japanese officers' buffer state strategy. The government authorized smuggling into China, disrupting the Chinese economy. A warrant for Yin's arrest was immediately issued by the Nationalist government.

The strategy was also an attempt to counter the British-backed monetary reform discussed earlier, and it has been referred to as the "second" North China separation strategy. On December 18, the Nationalist government established the Hebei-Chahar Political Council in Beiping under Song Zheyuan to counter the Japanese efforts (see Fig. 4.1).

Hirota did not get involved in the army's actions in northern China, stating that "the issue of autonomy has always been an internal Chinese matter." He instead attempted to move forward with his Three Principles. He was also in contact with Gen. Minami Jirō, Kwantung Army commander and Japan's ambassador to Manchukuo. He told Minami that, "holding firm to our convictions as the leader of East Asia," he intended to carry out negotiations over his principles to Japan's advantage in "close communication with the military" (who were pushing ahead with the North China separation strategy).

In other words, Hirota intended to use the army's plans for autonomy as a means of advancing his Three Principles. This was even though those principles were merely a list of demands toward China and could never serve as a foundation for the kind of "Sino-Japanese partnership" that he had advocated for. Ambassador to China Ariyoshi was critical of the plan as it gave the army a free hand in northern China. It would be difficult to argue that Hirota resisted the army's attempt to create buffer states in northern China in any meaningful way.⁶²

There were no hopeful signs for Hirota's foreign policy going into 1936. On January 13, the Okada government adopted the "Outline for the Management of North China," thereby giving governmental approval to the North China separation strategy.⁶³ It was at this time that Hirota told Harada Kumao:

I have nothing in particular to say regarding China at the moment, other than that the Chinese are approaching us saying, "We want a breakthrough. Let's hold a conference in Nanjing." But we're holding back a bit, telling them, "We'll think things over together once you've cracked down on the anti-Japanese movement."⁶⁴

There was no longer any sign of Hirota, the proponent of a "Sino-Japanese partnership." Instead, he favored a regional order centered around Japan. The closer



Fig. 4.1 Northeastern China (1935–36). *Source* Author created using GIMP, a graphics editing program

ties that he had been trying to build with Wang Jingwei were by now almost non-existent. And with the failure of his original foreign policy, he had changed course. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* lamented the change:

When he first became foreign minister, he waved the banner of “harmony diplomacy,” but the general impression is that Hirota’s diplomatic efforts have now faded from view. The state of our foreign policy over the year since the elevation of the Chinese embassy – particularly with regards to China – has even given rise to doubts about Hirota’s health. And most attribute [this poor state of affairs] to his relationship with the military.⁶⁵

Sino-Japanese Partnership at an Impasse

On January 15, Admiral Nagano Osami, Japan's chief naval delegate to the 2nd London Naval Conference, announced that Japan would be withdrawing. This had been decided by the cabinet on the 12th. The withdrawal meant that the Washington and London treaties would lose effect at the end of the year. It also meant the end of the "naval holiday" brought about by the era of naval disarmament. Three years earlier, Japan had left the League of Nations; now it was unbound by naval limitation treaties as well.⁶⁶

A week later, Hirota delivered a speech on his Three Principles to the House of Representatives. Speaking after Prime Minister Okada, he emphasized that:

This is well understood by the Chinese government, and it has already expressed its approval for these three principles. And it has recently proposed negotiations be opened for an amiable partnership between China and Japan in accordance with the spirit of these principles.

His attempt to deceive the body with his invocation of "an amiable partnership" and baseless claim that the Chinese had accepted his Three Principles was in vain; he was followed to the podium by Finance Minister Takahashi, and the Seiyūkai then submitted a motion of no confidence against the government. The Diet was dissolved, and a general election was scheduled. Hirota's speech was forgotten as the chamber filled with shouts of "Banzai!"⁶⁷

In marked contrast to just a year earlier, Hirota's address also received a cold reception from the Chinese.⁶⁸ With the North China separation strategy moving apace, it was only natural that any attempts at convincing the Chinese to accept the Three Principles were dead in the water from the very start. China's pro-Japanese faction—Hirota's intended partner—was also far from healthy. Shanghai Consul-General Ishii Itarō wrote in his diary:

As the aspects of Minister Hirota's address to the Diet relating to China were patently false, it received an incredibly negative reception in the Chinese press. It may have been only meant for domestic consumption, but trust is something that you can lose worldwide.⁶⁹

Rather than pursuing a Sino-Japanese partnership, Hirota's foreign policy toward China was now a de facto acceptance of the North China separation strategy; Japanese relations were at a standstill, and not just with China; with the West as well. With the Three Principles making no progress, Hirota was incapable of putting forward an effective foreign policy vision. Prime Minister Okada also expressed concern about Japan's relations with China.⁷⁰

But it would be overly harsh to attribute Japan's diplomatic stagnation to Hirota alone. Japanese distrust of China was deeply rooted, and the Chinese pro-Japanese faction's position had been insecure from the start. Attempting a partnership with China under these circumstances had always been certain to cause a domestic backlash from groups such as the army. And any softening of China policy in response to that backlash would inevitably further weaken the pro-Japanese faction. This was the double-bind faced by any attempt at a partnership, with the potential for making

Sino-Japanese relations worse. This was the dilemma for Hirota's foreign policy. His troubles lay in the inherently very low chance of success.

By the time the February 26th Incident shook the Japanese political landscape, Hirota's foreign policy was at a loss. He still had some luck left in him, however; the incident gave him a new lease on life, raising him to the position of prime minister.

* * *

On March 12, 1935, Hirota attended a ceremony at the Nippon Seinenkan in the outer garden of Meiji Jingū to mark the tenth anniversary of Sun Yat-sen's death. He was accompanied by Tōyama Mitsuru and Matsumoto Gaku. He read a statement saying, "As a young man, I visited [Sun] on several occasions during his exile and had the opportunity to personally hear about his aspirations."⁷¹

Tōyama and Sugiyama Shigemaru's "gold chrysanthemum" celebration was held in Tokyo in May. This event celebrated the fifty years that the two had known each other and was modeled on a golden wedding anniversary. Tōyama had introduced Hirota to Sugiyama while he was a student, and Hirota gave a speech in which he stated that "I have never forgotten, not for a single day, the debt I owe to both of these men for their tutelage; it is something I will never be able to repay."⁷²

Sugiyama passed away a mere two months later. His funeral was held at the Zōjō-ji temple, and Tōyama and Hirota served as chairman and deputy chairman for the event. When his remains were taken to Tokyo Station to be transported to Fukuoka for a Gen'yōsha funeral, the two watched them leave with tears. This reaction speaks to the strong bond Hirota had with the Gen'yōsha. Sugiyama had been one of Hirota's advisors on Asia policy.⁷³

Source Acronyms

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Notes

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71. Fujimoto Hisanori, ed., *Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Shashin-den* [Photographic Biography of Tōyama Mitsuru] (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1988), 67. See also: Itō Takashi, Hirose Yoshihiro, eds., *Matsumoto Manabu Nikki* [Diary of Matsumoto Manabu] (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1995), 93.
72. Fujimoto 68.
73. Shimomura Kainan, “Sugiyama Shigemaru-ō (Chū)” [Sugiyama Shigemaru (Part 2)], *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (July 28, 1935); Matsunaga Yasuzaemon, et al., *Sugiyama Shigemaru-ō Tsuiookairokuji* [Reminiscences of Sugiyama Shigemaru] (Tokyo: Ko-Sugiyama Shigemaru-ō Tsuiookukai, 1954), 14, 16; Ichimata Masao, Ōhata Tokushirō, eds., *Sugiyama Shigemaru—Meiji Tairiku Seisaku no Genryū* [Sugiyama Shigemaru: The Origins of Meiji Continental Policy] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1975), 248; Nakajima Kawatarō, Hosoya Ken'ichi, eds., *Yumeno Kyūsaku Zenshū* [The Complete Works of Yumeno Kyūsaku] (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1970), 7:92.

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Chapter 5

Ten Months as Prime Minister—Conflict with the Army



Abstract The fifth chapter discusses the ten months in 1936 in which Hirota served as prime minister. His government was formed in the immediate aftermath of the February 26th Incident, an attempted military coup d'état, and one of his major goals was the re-establishment of discipline within the army. His time in office was thus largely defined by the relationship between the army and the civilian government. But while Hirota was able to put up some resistance to the extensive army interference in his selection of cabinet officers and arrange for some public imperial criticism of the state of the army, it would be difficult to argue that he held the line against army pressure. He agreed to the restoration of the rule limiting the positions of war and naval minister to active-duty officers, effectively granting the military veto power over the formation of governments, and the major domestic and foreign policy documents adopted during his government heavily reflected the military's views. Given little time to prepare himself for the office, Hirota had few accomplishments as prime minister. Both the aforementioned restoration of the active-duty rule and the conclusion of the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany would have far-reaching implications for Japan moving forward, however.

The February 26 Incident

At 5 o'clock on the morning of February 26, 1936, Prime Minister Okada was suddenly awakened by the sound of a blaring alarm. Looking out onto the pre-dawn garden outside his window, he saw that snow had fallen over the course of the night. There were already three hundred rebel soldiers moving in on his residence.

The soldiers burst into the prime minister's residence and, finding an elderly man hiding in the building's middle garden, hesitated for a moment but then opened fire. Struck ten times, he died instantly. Examining the body of the man they had just ruthlessly killed, they identified him as Okada. But contrary to their belief, this was not Okada but rather his brother-in-law Matsuo Denzō. Okada miraculously survived the assault by hiding in a closet in the maid's room.¹

The rebel forces who rose up in what became known as the February 26 Incident had over 1,400 men, and the prime minister's residence was not the only location that they attacked. Home Minister Saitō Makoto, Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo, and Inspector General of Military Education Watanabe Jōtarō were all assassinated, and the soldiers occupied Nagatachō and Miyakezaka, the districts of Tokyo where much of the Japanese government was located.

The incident was an attempted coup d'état by young army officers close to the Imperial Way faction; they called for a "Shōwa Restoration" and had risen up to eliminate what they viewed as the "evil advisors surrounding the Throne." They pinned their hopes on Gen. Masaki Jinzaburō, Watanabe's predecessor as inspector general of military education, and hoped to make him prime minister. The Emperor was furious at their actions, however, declaring that "striking down all my most trusted senior vassals is akin to strangling me with a rope of silk."²

The Imperial Mandate

The uprising was finally suppressed when martial law was imposed and an imperial order issued instructing the soldiers to return to their barracks. When the Okada government resigned due to the incident, Saionji Kinmochi—who as the last *genrō* effectively chose the prime minister—recommended that Konoe Fumimaro, the president of the House of Peers, be Okada's successor. Konoe declined the mandate to form a government, however, citing health issues.

But while this was the reason given publicly, Konoe also revealed his true rationale for declining the position:

While health concerns were, of course, the primary reason that I declined to become prime minister, [Saionji's] failure to recognize the current, surprising situation was also partly responsible. Another major factor was being unable to find figures for the posts of war and navy minister, despite those being the most important positions at that moment.³

Konoe was very popular with the public, and these comments indicate just how difficult a situation the next government was expected to face. With Konoe no longer an option, the next person to get the nod would be, unexpectedly, Hirota. This was at the suggestion of President of the Privy Council Ichiki Kitokurō.

Konoe dispatched Yoshida Shigeru to Hirota to inform him. Yoshida had most recently served as ambassador to Italy and was well acquainted with Hirota as they had both entered the foreign ministry in the same year. After some convincing by Yoshida, Hirota decided to accept the appointment, albeit somewhat reluctantly. Konoe then told Saionji that "Foreign Minister Hirota has decided that, should he receive the imperial mandate, he would accept it."⁴

On the afternoon of March 5, Hirota received a call from the palace and immediately appeared before the Emperor, who ordered him to form a government. The Emperor laid out three conditions for Hirota's government: "First, conduct government in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution; second, do not cause

unnecessary friction in foreign affairs by acting unreasonably; third, do not cause any sudden changes in the business world.” These conditions were standard, being given to each prime minister.

Unusually, however, the Emperor added an additional, fourth condition for Hirota: “Fourth, do not disturb the peerage.” Puzzled by the Emperor’s words, Hirota confessed to an aide that he felt “as if I had been born fifty years too early.”⁵ He was, of course, a commoner, not a member of the peerage.

There are three things that the reader should keep in mind concerning this last instruction of the Emperor.

First, it is very unlikely that these words were meant to show that the Emperor saw Hirota’s commoner status as problematic; rather, they were to show that he expected caution when it came to any reform of the House of Peers or the peerage system (two contemporary topics of discussion). Suggested reforms for the House of Peers included a reduction in the number of members from the peerage and high taxpayers as well as the creation of some meritocratic positions among the number of imperial appointees. As this represented a potential blow to the peerage—viewed as the “defenders of the imperial house”—the reform was not something that the Emperor could just overlook.

Second, these words did not actually prevent the Hirota government from considering such reforms, and it established the Research Committee on the House of Peers with Hirota as chair. Ultimately no reforms were carried out, however.⁶

Third, we should not assume that Hirota was overawed by the Emperor; in fact, as will be discussed, he actually sought to use the Emperor for the enforcement of discipline in the military.

Choosing Hirota

It has already been mentioned that it was President of the Privy Council Ichiki who first suggested Hirota as a candidate for prime minister. But why? And how was this suggestion received by men like Saionji, Imperial Household Minister Yuasa Kurahei, and Home Ministry Chief Secretary Kido Kōichi? I would like to follow the events that led to Hirota receiving the imperial mandate to form a government.

These were described in a memorandum by Kido. According to this document, Ichiki, Yuasa, and Deputy Grand Chamberlain Hirohata Tadataka met in the dining hall for senior chamberlains on the evening of March 4. As they ate, Ichiki nonchalantly brought up Hirota as a possibility, suggesting that “he seems to have gotten on well with the Soviets since serving as ambassador there.” The others agreed, saying that “he might be a good choice.”

Kido wrote on why Hirota was seen as a suitable prime minister:

The February 26 Incident had been caused by the Crisis of 1935-36 and the view that there would be war against the Soviet Union. The idea was therefore to choose someone who could be expected to do well in managing relations with them. It was also believed that [choosing him] would be favorably viewed by the public.

The “crisis” referred to in this quote was the perception that, given the US Navy’s rate of warship construction, Japan’s defenses would become increasingly threatened from 1935 to 1936 onwards. Hirota was seen as a desirable choice from the perspective of shepherding Japan through diplomatic crises, including in Soviet-Japanese relations.

When Yuasa called Kido into his office and suggested Hirota, Kido gave his approval, saying “that would certainly be a possibility.” Yuasa then had Kido find out Saionji’s intentions for the premiership.

Kido visited Saionji in Tokyo, where they had the following exchange:

S: That is certainly an option. But do you really think that Hirota will accept the position?

K: We won’t know until we ask, but if you believe it’s worth moving forward with Hirota, I was thinking that we could have Prince Konoe [convince him].

S: Alright, please give that a try.

Having thus confirmed that Saionji was not opposed, Kido phoned Konoe and requested that he convince Hirota to become prime minister. Konoe then in turn immediately sent Yoshida to visit Hirota. Hirota told Yoshida that, “if I have [Saionji], and the key vassals are unified in their support of me, then I will accept the position.”

There are two points that I would like to emphasize from the above course of events. First, the greatest expectation placed on Hirota was that he would ease tensions with the Soviet Union. It seems likely that Ichiki had Hirota’s earlier moderate diplomatic approach in mind when he suggested him. Ichiki was generally an extremely reticent man and would have been unlikely to initiate Hirota’s candidacy otherwise. Second, Hirota’s appointment was the result of discussions between Ichiki, Yuasa, Kido, and Saionji. With Konoe having already rejected the position, Saionji would have felt like he was running out of figures suitable to be prime minister.⁷

Why Did Hirota Accept?

But given the domestic and diplomatic instability plaguing Japan, why did Hirota choose to expose himself to danger by taking up the position? Prime Minister Inukai had been assassinated just four years earlier in the May 15th Incident, and his successor Saitō Makoto had been a victim of the February 26 Incident (albeit after he had left office). Prime Minister Okada may have miraculously escaped the incident unscathed, but its aftermath was still fresh. Forming a government at this point was drawing the short straw; even Konoe, widely seen as the best choice for the job, had avoided it.

It was Hirota’s anger over the February 26 Incident and, by extension, the army that led to his decision to form a government despite the hardships. As he took office, he viewed “dealing with the February 26 Incident” as the “greatest matter of national concern.”⁸ Hirota intended to bring strict military discipline back to the army, and he boldly chose to incorporate the Emperor’s speech from the throne at the opening of the Imperial Diet into that effort.

The May 4 opening session of the House of Peers was the first such session in the wake of the formation of the Hirota government, and the Emperor was in attendance. As cabinet officers, the presidents and vice-presidents of both houses of the Diet, and Diet members watched on, Hirota respectfully approached the throne and handed the Emperor the imperial rescript for his speech. The Emperor then began to read aloud:

I hereby proclaim the opening of the Imperial Diet to all members of the House of Peers and the House of Representatives. I am greatly pleased that relations between the Empire and our allies grow increasingly close.⁹

There was nothing novel about these words, but this changed as he continued:

I found the recent incident that occurred in Tokyo to be regrettable. I hope that our loyal subjects, whether in the government or among the people, be they civilian or military, unite in harmony to contribute to the prosperity of the nation.

When the Emperor explicitly stated that he found the incident “regrettable,” the assembly gasped at the strong language. This was an extremely unusual usage of strict language, even given the Emperor’s anger over the incident. When Hirota rose to speak after the Emperor, he announced that:

I am truly overawed by the words of the imperial rescript read in today’s opening ceremony. I humbly pledge to faithfully fulfill the imperial command and will exert every effort to achieve its objectives.

Hirota had been deeply involved in the drafting of the rescript. In his words:

Earnestly pleading with the Emperor to include a declaration in the imperial rescript that the army’s actions had been unacceptable required an unprecedented amount of determination. It was a risk. [...] Never before in all of Japanese history had an opening ceremony imperial rescript included language comparable to “I found the incident regrettable.” All of the Diet members were deeply moved [when it was read aloud], and there was a consensus that the dreadful situation needed to be corrected.¹⁰

In other words, Hirota had personally drafted the imperial rescript, aware of the Emperor’s anger over the February 26 Incident. As he told Harada, “the phrase ‘I find it regrettable’ had previously been used in wartime, such as during the Russo-Japanese War.” Its use here was sufficient to overawe not just the Diet members in attendance but the general public as well. The rescript seems to have also been a major influence in pushing the military to take steps to implement discipline.¹¹

Before making it to the opening ceremony, however, Hirota had had to overcome the great hurdle of putting together a cabinet. I would like to now turn back to early March and examine Hirota’s disputes with the army in his selection of cabinet officers.

Army Interference in the Formation of the Hirota Government

Upon his return to the foreign minister's residence in Kōjimachi on March 5 after receiving the imperial mandate, he set up a government formation headquarters there. At this point, he intended to have Yoshida Shigeru succeed him as foreign minister. Yoshida, who had been born in 1878 like Hirota, had already retired and left government service. It had been Yoshida who had convinced him to accept the position of prime minister, and Hirota saw him as a natural choice for foreign minister.

Yoshida described this in his memoirs:

At the request of Prince Konoe Fumimaro, I approached Hirota Kōki about being a candidate for prime minister. And, having encouraged his candidacy, I then joined his government formation headquarters and participated in the discussions over the selection of cabinet officers. It was through this involvement that I myself became a candidate for foreign minister.¹²

Hirota had earlier invited Yoshida to join Matsui Iwane's Greater Asia Society (Dai Ajia Kyōkai), but Yoshida had been unimpressed by its Pan-Asianist inclinations and stopped attending its meetings. He later wrote that "it was from that period that the military and right-wing took on an instinctive dislike of me."¹³

Other members of Hirota's headquarters included Ohara Naoshi (justice minister in the previous Okada government), Baba Eiichi (president of Nippon Kangyō Bank), Nagata Hidejirō (former mayor of Tokyo), and Fujinuma Shōhei (former chief of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police). The foreign minister's residence was located across from the now bloodstained prime minister's residence. Hirota fully devoted himself to the task of forming a government and did not return to his home in Harajuku during this period.

Hirota's efforts were impeded by incoming war minister General Terauchi Hisahide, the son of former prime minister Terauchi Masatake. Despite his titles, Terauchi was not in control of the army, however; to the contrary, he was subject to heavy pressure from Lt. Col. Mutō Akira, a senior member of the War Ministry Military Affairs Bureau Military Affairs Section. Situations like this of lower ranking officers exerting control over their nominal superiors were commonplace in the contemporary, post-February 26 Incident army.

The army intervened to prevent Hirota from having Yoshida—a member of the foreign ministry's pro-Western faction and son-in-law of the liberal Makino Nobuaki—join the cabinet. Similarly, while he had intended to have Ohara remain justice minister, the army blocked this on the grounds that he had been too lenient toward Minobe Tatsukichi, a professor at Tokyo Imperial University whose constitutional theory that the Emperor was an "organ of the state," while once mainstream, had come under heavy attack from the right. Shimomura Hiroshi, vice-president of the Asahi Shimbun, was also rejected by the army as a candidate for colonial minister because he was seen as too liberal.

The army blocked the appointment of Kawasaki Takukichi, minister of education in the Okada government, to the position of home minister because he was a member

of the Minseitō, but he was allowed to become minister of commerce. When the army demanded that the cabinet only contain one member each from the Minseitō and Seiyūkai, Hirota compromised on two each for a total of four. These selections were made on the recommendations of the two parties' presidents.¹⁴

While the appointment of the two preceding prime ministers—Saitō and Okada—had brought the era of party governments to an end as they were both admirals, their governments had represented a middle ground; each had had five cabinet officers belonging to political parties. The inclusion of four party politicians in Hirota's cabinet was thus not a particularly exceptional number.

This did not prevent Terauchi from incessantly seeking to interfere with the selection of cabinet officers, including objecting when Hirota visited Minseitō President Machida Chūji to discuss the appointments. According to Hirota, Terauchi told him that he “would be unable to take up the position of war minister” on the grounds that “my decision to visit the president of a political party showed that I was placing undue emphasis on the parties, and this was unacceptable to the army.” Hirota responded by informing Terauchi that “I would not agree to ignoring the political parties and that, should the army hold firm on this point, I would abandon my efforts to form a government.”¹⁵

There can be no doubt that the army had not forgotten its anger at Hirota from his elevation of the Chinese legation to an embassy and the subsequent North China separation strategy. Another factor behind the army's opposition to Hirota is believed to be that it had hoped that Konoe or Vice President of the Privy Council Hiranuma Kiichirō would become prime minister.¹⁶

Formation of the Hirota Government

The Hirota government's lineup was ultimately finalized on the evening of March 8. When Terauchi appeared at the government formation headquarters, Hirota handed him the list of names, saying, “I assume this is acceptable.” Terauchi replied, “One moment,” and left to discuss the list with members of the Military Affairs Bureau who were waiting in another room.

He returned thirty minutes later and said, “as expected, I cannot consent to the formation of a cabinet that includes more than one figure from each political party.” With its efforts thus undone, discussions at the headquarters stretched into the night, with many returning home. At this rate, there would be no Hirota government.

Hirota then came up with a scheme for turning the army's inflexibility around on it. He had Fujinuma call Terauchi to inform him that “I will announce in the newspapers tomorrow that I am unable to form a government, and that it is the army that has prevented me from doing so.” A panicking Terauchi then compromised, saying that “if you consent to the text carried by my envoy, then I will agree to the government's formation tomorrow.”

Lt. Col. Mutō, the man who had pressured Terauchi into interfering with the formation of Hirota's cabinet, arrived at the headquarters at 1:30 a.m. carrying a

statement. The army's statement was self-serving; it demanded a complete change in the nation's governance and a reinvention of the political parties. But it also accepted two cabinet officers each from the Seiyūkai and Minseitō.

After making minor adjustments to the statement, Hirota notified Terauchi of his approval at 2:30 a.m. He presented the Emperor with the list of names for the cabinet later that day, and the ceremony for the appointment of the cabinet was held, finally forming the Hirota government. Hirota thus became the first prime minister to have passed the diplomatic officer's examination. He was also fifty-eight, ten years older than his predecessor, Prime Minister Okada had been upon assuming the position.¹⁷

The members of the Hirota cabinet were:

Ushio Shigesuke (home minister).

Baba Eiichi (finance minister).

Terauchi (war minister).

Nagano Osami (navy minister).

Hayashi Raisaburō (justice minister).

Shimada Toshio (agriculture minister).

Tanomogi Keikichi (communications minister).

Maeda Yonezō (railway minister).

Nagata Hidejirō (colonial minister).

Fujinuma (chief cabinet secretary).

Tsugita Daisaburō (director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau).

Ushio initially held the position of education minister as well but was replaced by Hirao Hachisaburō on March 25. And while Kawasaki Takukichi was named commerce minister, he died suddenly and was succeeded by Ogawa Gōtarō on March 28. Shimada and Maeda belonged to the Seiyūkai, while Tanomogi, Kawasaki, and Ogawa belonged to the Minseitō. Hirota would continue to hold the position of foreign minister for the first month of his government.

First Cabinet Meeting

As Hirota became prime minister, he likely foresaw many difficulties in his immediate future. The mere act of forming a government had nearly been unsuccessful, and he was coming to power in the immediate aftermath of the February 26 Incident, the most serious coup attempt in modern Japanese history. Japan's international relations were strained and the government faced the difficult task of instilling discipline in the army.

The steel gate to the prime minister's residence had been barred since the February 26 Incident. On March 9, Hirota had it opened after his appointment ceremony. The twelve days of political vacuum that had begun with the attack on Prime Minister Okada had now come to a close.

Entering the prime minister's residence and stepping onto the brand new scarlet carpet, Hirota held his first cabinet meeting at 10:10 p.m. that evening. He began by conveying the first three private instructions he had received from the Emperor to his twelve newly appointed cabinet officers. He kept the Emperor's fourth instruction not to disturb the peerage to himself.¹⁸

He underscored the gravity of the situation to the cabinet, noting that "The people's expectations for the government are extremely high given the current emergency, and I intend to offer my sincere service." After the meeting ended, he similarly told them that "I believe that Japan is currently facing a truly serious crisis, and we are being watched both at home and from abroad. We must exercise constant vigilance as we govern."¹⁹

* * *

With his first day as prime minister concluded, he returned to the foreign minister's residence late in evening. There, his family awaited him. His wife Shizuko in a kimono, Hiroo and Masao in morning coats, and Miyoko and Toyoko in glamorous Western dresses.

Twenty to thirty of his old friends from the Gen'yōsha had also traveled to Tokyo from Fukuoka. As the elderly patriots and Hirota's esteemed comrades-in-arms extended their congratulations on his appointment, Hirota thanked them for coming.

Excited by the appearance of the first prime minister from Fukuoka, the crowd cheered loudly, held up beers, and started to sing "Kuroda Bushi," an old favorite of the samurai of the area:

Sake wa nome, nome, nomu naraba	If you drink, drink, drink
Hi no Moto ichi no kono yari o	If you drink enough to take
Nomitoru-hodo ni nomu naraba	This, the greatest spear in Japan
Sorezo makoto no Kuroda bushi	Then you are a true Kuroda samurai ²⁰

It was a bold and manly drinking song, and its name—meaning "Kuroda samurai"—came from the Kuroda clan, the rulers of Fukuoka domain prior to the Meiji period.

Hirota and Shizuko sang along with their old friends, but his father Tokubei, who still worked as a stonemason in their hometown, was absent. Thinking of his old father, Hirota was overcome with emotion.

The couple were surrounded by thunderous applause, cheers, and shouts of "Hirota Banzai" and "Gen'yōsha Banzai." The celebration went on through the night.²¹

Two Goals

And so, Hirota was finally prime minister. He had filled the political vacuum left in the wake of the February 26 Incident and shown surprising tenacity in assembling his cabinet in the face of army opposition. This in itself can be regarded as an accomplishment. Having served in the previous government, it seems likely that his immediate intention had been to put an end to the political chaos in Tokyo.

But what was it that he hoped to accomplish now that he was prime minister? As mentioned earlier, he put an emphasis on restoring military discipline and had drafted the wording of the Emperor's speech for the opening of the Diet to that end. Continuing to serve as foreign minister for the beginning of his government, he also hoped to be able to exercise his diplomatic prowess.

The sudden nature of his appointment as prime minister and the difficulty he had experienced in putting together a cabinet meant that he had not had the time to develop a new diplomatic vision, however. In particular, he had no new plan for relations with China at a time when students in Beiping and Tianjin were still demonstrating against his Three Principles.²²

This is not to say that Hirota had absolutely no idea what he wanted to do diplomatically, however. On his first day as prime minister, he released a statement on his government's policies which included some discussion of foreign policy:

We believe that the present situation within and outside of the Empire demands that we find a way to overcome this crisis through a complete change to the maladministration of previous governments and the adoption of an independent and proactive approach to adjusting our international relations. We also strongly believe that the recent unfortunate incident had its root causes in this as well. This is a critical moment, and we must undertake major reforms.²³

Hirota laid out two goals in this statement: the implementation of a new foreign policy that “adopts an independent and proactive posture in adjusting our international relations,” and the enforcement of military discipline in the wake of the February 26 Incident.

Hampering the achievement of these goals was pressure from the army. The army of this period advocated for four major policies: “clarification of the national polity,” stabilization of the public's livelihood, diplomatic reform, and the expansion of national defense. The first of these was a rejection of Minobe Tatsukichi's emperor organ theory (discussed earlier) and party politics. It was an assertion that all governing authority derived from the Emperor.

Hirota discussed his views on foreign policy and other issues at a cabinet meeting on March 17 and issued the following statement afterwards:

The situation facing our nation domestically and internationally is a precarious one. The root causes of this are firmly entrenched, and the government will act with firm resolution to renovate all aspects of government to overcome this difficult situation. [...] In light of the current international situation, the government shall strive to expand our national defense and related functions, and to establish a unified, independent, and proactive foreign policy.

In addition to the above, Hirota also referenced clarifying the national polity and making educational and financial reforms. While “renovation of all aspects of government” (*shosei isshin*) became a slogan for the Hirota government, this was due to pressure from members of the army like Terauchi.

Hirota may have been successful in including four party politicians in his cabinet, but the overall effect of the unsuccessful February 26 Incident was a strengthening of the army’s political control, particularly that of the Control faction. This was the situation in which Hirota had been appointed prime minister.²⁴

Hirota remained foreign minister for the first month of his premiership, but after reiterating his Three Principles, he replaced himself with Ambassador to China Arita Hachirō. He later explained:

The choice of Ambassador to China Arita for foreign minister was made by me, not the army. Arita was a career diplomat who had opposed Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations while serving as vice-minister. I had shared his views, and that meant that I trusted him.²⁵

As foreign minister, Hirota had attempted to maintain positive relations with Britain and America rather than succumb to an exclusionary Pan-Asianism even as he had simultaneously sought to create a “Chinese-Manchukuoan-Japanese” regional order and to have the Soviet Union and Germany grant de facto recognition to Manchukuo.

Hirota’s foreign policy was thus dual-natured, and he attempted to hold to the words of the imperial rescript issued when Japan withdrew from the League: “It is Our desire to promote mutual confidence between Our Empire and all the other Powers and to make known the justice of its cause throughout the world.” It was likely in that context that he agreed with Arita. The army may have prevented Yoshida Shigeru from joining the cabinet, but with Hirota’s selection of Arita, he was able to provide some resistance.

The major figures in the foreign ministry were now: Horinouchi Kensuke (vice-minister), Kuwashima Kazue (East Asian Affairs Bureau), Tōgō Shigenori (European and Asian Affairs Bureau), Okamoto Suemasa (American Affairs Bureau), Matsushima Shikao (Commercial Affairs Bureau), Kuriyama Shigeru (Treaties Bureau), and Amō Eiji (Information Department). Kuwashima, Tōgō, Kuriyama, and Amō remained in place from the Okada government.

Yoshida Shigeru also departed to become ambassador to Britain. According to his memoirs:

I briefly intended to enter the cabinet when the Hirota government was formed, but opposition from the military prevented this from coming to pass. Prime Minister Hirota felt bad about what had happened and [appointed me as ambassador] out of consideration.²⁶

Yoshida and Hirota had nearly worked together, but now they were separated by the Eurasian continent.

Restoration of the Active-Duty Officer Requirement

The most pressing task for Hirota was not foreign policy, however, but imposing discipline on the army in the wake of the February 26 Incident. But as he had only limited power in military affairs, he was forced to leave the matter to War Minister Terauchi. As part of this effort, Araki Sadao, Masaki Jinzaburō, and other prominent members of the Imperial Way faction were moved to the reserve list in March.

On April 15, Hirota told Harada Kumao that:

Based on what I've been told by the minister of war, the perpetrators of the February 26 Incident may be indicted and punished by the Emperor's birthday [April 29]. Given the large number of people who were involved behind the scenes, however, it may take until after the Diet session has ended for all parties [to be tried].²⁷

The army court martial for the rebel officers directly involved in the incident began on April 28, and they were sentenced on July 5. Fifteen of these officers were then executed on July 12. They were tried in private with no legal representation or right of appeal. On June 5, Hirota told Harada that “defense arguments in the February 26 Incident trial began the day before yesterday and will take about a week. If Masaki is indicted, we will need to have a full general serve as judge.”²⁸ Masaki was taken into custody in July for collaborating with the rebel officers and found not guilty in September 1937.

The army also proposed limiting the positions of war and navy minister to active-duty full and lieutenant generals (or their naval equivalents), nominally for the purpose of reinforcing military discipline by preventing the officers who had been moved to the reserve list from returning. In other words, not satisfied with having prevented Yoshida and others from entering Hirota's cabinet, the army now wanted further control over the cabinet's membership.

This active-duty requirement had first been put into place in 1900, under the same terms now being put forward by the army. But the rule had been removed in 1913 by the 1st Yamamoto Gonbee government in the wake of the 1st Movement to Protect the Constitution, opening up the ministerial positions to officers on the first and second reserve lists as well. No such officers had ever actually been appointed as minister, but it was under this revised system that the era of party politics began. Now, the army wanted the return of the restriction lifted twenty-three years earlier.

As discussed earlier, the army had already extensively interfered with the formation of the Hirota government. Should the active-duty restriction be restored, it would systematize such interference by giving the military the ability to refuse to provide qualifying officers to any government with which it disagreed. It would become even more difficult to form governments that the army opposed or to make appointments favoring the political parties.

And yet, the Hirota government readily acceded to the army's demand on April 24, and the rule was restored on May 18.

There is no evidence that Hirota put up any strong resistance to the restoration of the rule, despite acknowledging at the time that “limiting the positions of war

and navy minister to active-duty officers has significantly increased the military ministers' political power and, accordingly, their responsibility."²⁹

Why Hirota Agreed

Why, then, did Hirota agree to restoring the rule? There are three potential reasons:

First, the Hirota government had made restoring discipline to the army one of its missions, and it was under that pretext that the army was advocating for the rule to be reinstated. Hirota lacked sufficient justification to oppose the action, and the army was thus able to turn one of its own scandals into an institutional reform in its favor. Paradoxically, Hirota's decision in the wake of the February 26 Incident to make military discipline into one of his government's public objectives made it difficult to resist the reform sought by the army and thereby contributed to an actual increase in its political power.

Second, Hirota was not particularly attached to party politics and had himself previously served on the board of the Kokuikai, an organization that had been critical of the practice. His rise to the top of the Japanese political world had largely been due to his adaptation to the rise of reformist forces opposed to party governments. This was one of the clear distinctions between Hirota and members of the older foreign policy mainstream like Shidehara who had pursued collaborative diplomacy within party politics.

Third, Hirota obtained what could be considered a deal in exchange for reinstating the active duty rule. Traditionally, incoming war ministers were chosen by the three most powerful figures in the army: the serving war minister, the chief of the general staff, and the inspector general of military education. Hirota proposed that the war minister instead be appointed by the prime minister, and he apparently received Terauchi's informal consent to the change.³⁰

That this condition existed is based on claims from Hirota himself, who asserted that he argued to War Minister Terauchi and Navy Minister Nagano that:

While I agree with your desired change, he who has received the mandate from His Majesty the Emperor to form a government must be able to choose freely from any full and lieutenant generals (or full and vice admirals) without interference from anyone, just as he can choose any other cabinet officer.

According to Hirota, Terauchi and Nagano were "in full agreement" with this condition when he proposed it.³¹ And yet, this exchange was never formalized. Hirota's failure to follow fully through was typical of him. In any case, with memories of the February 26 Incident still fresh, there can be no doubt that Hirota was greatly influenced by pressure from the army.

The reinstatement of the active-duty officer rule would prevent Ugaki Kazushige from forming a government in 1937 and cause the fall of the Yonai Mitsumasa government in 1940. It should not be forgotten, however, that the army had already

interfered significantly in Hirota's cabinet selection even prior to the restoration of the rule. As such, we should not overestimate the significance of the rule.

A Dim View of China

On April 17, the Hirota government decided to increase the strength of the Chinese Garrison Army to 5,774 men, roughly three times its previous size. This was intended to help defend northern China from communism as well as providing a check on the Kwantung Army, which had a tendency to interfere with things to the south of Manchukuo. The army leadership wanted to force the Kwantung Army to concentrate entirely on preparations to counter the Soviet Union. Hirota likely agreed with this goal.

The placement of the Chinese Garrison Army on the outskirts of Beijing—and the exercises that it repeatedly conducted in close proximity to the Chinese military—would ultimately be a cause of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.³² The increase in the army's size could potentially provoke a Chinese response, but there are no indications that Hirota was concerned about this possibility.

How did Hirota view Sino-Japanese relations at this time? On May 6, he attended a plenary session of the House of Peers and delivered a policy speech that provides an answer.

After being introduced by President Konoe Fumimaro, Hirota addressed the silenced assembly in a solemn and powerful tone. He spoke of the “unprecedented scandal” of the February 26 Incident, clarification of the national polity, the “special, inseparable relationship between Japan and Manchukuo,” and the creation of a “unified, independent, and proactive foreign policy.” He also issued a warning about “anti-Japanese and anti-Manchukuoan” sentiments in China:

We are ever vigilant when it comes to developments in the Chinese political situation. We will take every step to bring about the correction of China's anti-Japanese and anti-Manchukuoan attitudes and to promote friendly ties between Japan, Manchukuo, and China.

Perhaps due to pressure from the army, Hirota was now leaning somewhat closer toward a Japan-centered regional order in East Asia than he had as foreign minister. His words echoed through the chamber for twenty-five minutes, and the Diet members listened in hushed silence.³³ This was the first Diet since the February 26 Incident, and the chamber was filled with an unusual tension; even the gallery was overcrowded.³⁴

Following Hirota's speech, Foreign Minister Arita called attention to the Soviet Union's military expansion, and War Minister Terauchi spoke on the remedial actions taken since the February 26 Incident.

On May 12, Hirota was asked in the House of Peers about the events that led to him receiving the mandate to form a government. He answered from the podium that:

Three generations of prime ministers have dedicated their lives to serving our nation. Although I am a man of very little ability, I am reminded of Lord Kusunoki's feelings

as he advanced to Minatogawa, his sword broken and arrows exhausted. I felt that this was the moment in which I needed to step forward and do my best for the country.³⁵

Kusunoki Masahige was a fourteenth-century warrior who obeyed an imperial order to face Ashikaga Takauji at the Battle of Minatogawa despite knowing that he would be defeated. From the Meiji period, Kusunoki was praised as a paragon of loyalty to the imperial house. Hirota frankly admitted that, as “the mandate to form a government had arrived suddenly and unexpectedly,” he had not been able to fully prepare himself for the premiership. Konoe likely felt some embarrassment listening to the speech, as he had avoided having to serve as prime minister himself.

The “Fundamentals of National Policy”—Expanding Both North and South

Hirota may not have had an opportunity to fully prepare himself, but that did not mean that the tumultuous age would wait for him. While he had advocated for “friendly ties between Japan, Manchukuo, and China,” the contemporary situation shifted further than he had expected.

The decision was made to revise Japanese foreign policy from the three perspectives of national defense, diplomacy, and domestic policy; this resulted in three policy documents: a revised “Imperial Defense Policy” (Teikoku Kokubō Hōshin), “Imperial Diplomatic Policy” (Teikoku Gaikō Hōshin), and “Fundamentals of National Policy” (Kokusaku no Kijun). I would like to look at the revision of the Imperial Defense Policy first.

First formulated in 1907, the Imperial Defense Policy was Japan’s highest-level national defense plan and had been revised in 1918 and 1923 in light of the changes in the international environment. The army and navy had been working on a new revision even prior to the February 26 Incident, and this was approved by the Emperor on June 3, 1936. This new version held that:

In keeping with the basic principles of national defense, the defense of the Empire is aimed at the United States and Russia, which possess significant power, are well armed, and have a high potential for entering into conflicts with us. Additionally, preparations against China and the United Kingdom will also be made.

Britain had thus been added alongside America, the Soviet Union, and China as one of Japan’s prospective enemies. While Japan would make preparations for carrying out a protracted war, the document also argued for bringing any war to a rapid conclusion. It was thus “especially crucial to work to enhance the strength available in the initial stages of operations.”³⁶ Hirota met with the Emperor on May 29 to answer questions about the revised policy, but the substance of this conversation is unknown. While Hirota was prime minister, he had almost no involvement in the document’s formulation; that was the work of the army and navy.³⁷ This was the revision of the Imperial Defense Policy that was in effect during the Second Sino-Japanese and Pacific Wars.

The Imperial Diplomatic Policy was approved at an August 7 meeting of Hirota, Arita, Terauchi and Nagano. Later that day, these same ministers (with the addition of Finance Minister Baba) also adopted the Fundamentals of National Policy.

The Imperial Diplomatic Policy reflected the army's policies, emphasizing the need to "eliminate [the Soviet] military threat and prevent the spread of communism." Hirota's greatest diplomatic successes in his first term as foreign minister had come from easing tensions with the Soviet Union, but now the diplomatic guidelines adopted by his government favored taking a hardline stance toward the country. Unlike the Imperial Defense Policy, however, the Imperial Diplomatic Policy stressed having "friendly relations" with Britain.

These sorts of fluctuations in Hirota's foreign policy had already become evident while he was foreign minister. He had advanced a policy of easing tensions with the Soviets at the Five-Minister Conference and through the purchase of the North Manchuria Railway, and yet the need to defend against communism had also been incorporated into his Three Principles.

This indicates the ease with which Hirota's foreign policy shifted and, by extension, the instability and lack of strategic vision that Japanese diplomacy suffered from. When Ichiki had suggested that Hirota be made prime minister, he had done so in expectation of improved relations with the Soviets; now, things were moving in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, the Fundamentals of National Policy adopted the same day included "securing the Empire's position on the East Asian mainland while expanding into and developing the South Seas" as a national goal. It thus reflected both the navy's southern expansion doctrine (*nanshin-ron*) and the army's northern expansion doctrine (*hokushin-ron*).³⁸ That said, the outlined idea—removing the Soviet threat while simultaneously pushing to the south on the basis of a Chinese-Manchukuoan-Japanese partnership—clearly exceeded Japan's national capabilities.

Hirota would later discuss this reckless document with Tōgō Shigenori while being held in Sugamo Prison after the war:

It resulted from the army taking advantage of the navy's desire to justify a naval expansion plan following the abrogation of the naval limitation treaties. It was put together solely with the goal of obtaining additional funding; I didn't consider it to have any actual significance beyond that point.³⁹

As acknowledged by Hirota, while nominally adopted to lay out the basis for the state's policies, the Fundamentals of National Policy was largely intended to justify expansion of the military. One reason for the navy's push for additional ships was that, as Japan had withdrawn from the 2nd London Naval Conference, the London Naval Treaty would lose effect in 1937. Under Finance Minister Baba, the Hirota government rapidly expanded military funding, partially leading to the construction of the battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*.

Hirota was correct that this was merely a scheme to increase military spending. But at the same time, the massive expenditures in the name of this goal—half of the national budget—meant that once Japan had reached the brink of war, it was difficult for the military to say that it was unprepared to fight.

Hirota reported to the Emperor on these two policy documents on August 15.⁴⁰

Difficulties Managing Sino-Japanese Relations

On August 11, the foreign, war, naval, and finance ministries adopted the “China Action Plan” (Taishi Jikkōsaku) and the “Second Administrative Plan for Northern China” (Dai Niji Hokushi Shori Yōkō) on the basis of the Imperial Diplomatic Policy. Under the China Action Plan, Japan was to seek a military alliance with the Nationalist government as well as an agreement for joint military action against communism. Among its other elements were the appointment of Japanese advisors in China and the promotion of economic collaboration.

The Second Administrative Plan for Northern China held that Japan would first complete the “separate rule” of Hebei and Chahar provinces. This document did more than merely reconfirm the army’s separation strategy for northern China, however; it included plans for the development of natural resources in the region as well.⁴¹

These plans were drawn up in meetings of the above-mentioned four ministries; Hirota was not involved. He is believed to have delegated the matter to Arita, his chosen successor as foreign minister. The proposal for joint action against communism with the Nationalist government was in line with his Three Principles, however, and his government was also working on an anti-communist agreement with Germany. As will be discussed shortly, Hirota envisioned China joining the Anti-Comintern Pact.

With the decline of the pro-Japanese faction in China making a political “Sino-Japanese partnership” unlikely, Hirota sought to strengthen the countries’ economic relations instead. After the war, he said, “I always emphasized trade with China and worked to expand that, particularly while I was prime and foreign minister.”⁴²

But anti-Japanese sentiment in China took a violent turn at this time. On August 24, four Japanese (including reporters from the Osaka Mainichi Shimbun) were attacked by a mob in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, leaving two dead. And on September 3, several Chinese burst into a Japanese-owned business in Beihai, Guangdong Province and murdered the owner.

This led the Hirota government to have Ambassador to China Kawagoe Shigeru push for the eradication of anti-Japanese sentiment. While Foreign Minister Zhang Qun seemed favorable toward such a crackdown, he also proposed the dissolution of the East Hebei Autonomous Anti-Communist Government and an end to smuggling. Zhang was knowledgeable about Japan, having studied at a Japanese army military academy, and he agreed to discuss a joint defense against communism. In general, however, he took a harsher stance toward Japan than Wang Jingwei had. Kawagoe also met with Chiang Kai-shek, but the efforts to improve the countries’ working relations went poorly.⁴³

Even so, Hirota did not consider Sino-Japanese relations to be in danger. When questioned in advance of the Tokyo Trials, he asserted that “there was no particular incident from my time as prime minister that was directly connected to the [Second

Sino-Japanese War].”⁴⁴ Busy with his duties as prime minister, however, he was unable to take the lead on China policy. Asked about the killings in Chengdu, he told the investigators that “I was busy as prime minister; I think you’ll be able to find out the details if you ask the foreign minister.”⁴⁵

The Seven Cardinal Policies and Hirota’s Vision for “Unified Command”

On August 25, 1936, the Hirota government unveiled seven items that were meant to serve as concrete action toward its promised “renovation of all aspects of government.” These became known as its Seven Cardinal Policies. Later that day, Hirota described the policies to Harada Kumao in the following way:

We adopted seven “national policies” at today’s cabinet meeting: first, the expansion of the national defense; second, the reform and improvement of education; third, improvement of the tax system in both rural and urban areas; fourth, stabilization of the people’s livelihoods; fifth, promotion of industry and expansion of trade; sixth, enactment of important policies towards Manchukuo; and seventh, the improved functioning of administrative bodies. As there was general agreement on these points, they were adopted without issue.⁴⁶

The sixth of these items included immigration policies and the promotion of investment. Five months into his government, Hirota was finally revealing the full scope of what was meant by “renovation of all aspects of government” and taking budgetary steps toward them.

Feeling that these policies did not go far enough, War Minister Terauchi and Navy Minister Nagano visited Hirota on September 21 and submitted a joint opinion paper, the “Guidelines for the Improved Functioning of Political and Administrative Bodies” (Seiji Gyōsei Kikō Seibi Kaizen Yōkō). The paper proposed reforms to Japan’s parliamentary system as well as the mergers of the foreign and colonial ministries and of the agricultural and commercial ministries. The political parties push back against the proposals, believing that the military’s goal was to increase their own influence and reduce the authority of the Diet.⁴⁷

After receiving the paper, Hirota told the two men that:

I will carefully study this and try to meet your requests as much as is possible. However, this government needs to get to work first, and we will begin with the implementation of the seven cardinal policies we recently adopted. And to do that, we need to pass the budget.⁴⁸

He thus attempted to move forward without incorporating the views of the paper into the seven policies. He had also been working on a bold vision for a “unified command.” He described this to Harada on the 29th:

While the army and navy go on about the need to reform various bodies, I cannot help but feel that what we actually need to aim for first is unifying command. In other words, all matters of command must be put into His Majesty’s hands and the army and navy brought together into an Imperial headquarters to avoid conflict.⁴⁹

Imperial headquarters was the highest level of command in the Japanese forces, existing directly under the Emperor. The only previous times that such a headquarters had been established had been during the First Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars. Discord between the military branches tended to complicate foreign policy, and Hirota hoped that this could be avoided by establishing a higher body.

The Inner Mongolian Army (a Japanese-backed force) attempted to invade Suiyan Province in November with support from the Kwantung Army but was driven back the following month.

On December 4, Hirota spoke to Arita of his resolve to stop such adventurism, telling him that:

If the Kwantung Army were to deploy troops in defiance of the army leadership, then I would have to stop them, even if it might cost me the premiership. There's no way I could just stand by and let it happen.

He also noted that "as the weather will make further military action in Suiyan impossible, I want to address this matter with diplomacy."⁵⁰

The army leadership was also opposed to the events, and the Kwantung did not itself deploy any troops to Suiyan. Hirota gave an overview of the situation to Harada on the 7th:

There will be no dispatch of troops to Inner Mongolia. The problem is, what will the Kwantung Army do now? This is an issue that I've been considering ever since taking office, and I still believe that the best thing to do would be to unify the army and navy in an Imperial headquarters subject to the supreme command authority of His Majesty. The commander of this body would be above the now-unified army and navy and would always report to His Majesty, the command-in-chief.⁵¹

This concept, apparently a development of the "unified command" idea he had spoken of in September, had the potential to weaken the cabinet's authority. But Hirota had been burned by the military too often and hoped that Emperor's judgment would prevail.

While the idea was an interesting one, he does not seem to have gone any farther with it than his discussion with Harada, however. The idea was passed on to Saionji, but there is little evidence that Hirota ever attempted to take concrete steps toward making this actual policy. One cannot help but feel frustrated with his failure to follow through here; it brings to mind the ultimately inconsequential deal he had made with Terauchi in forming his government.

The Intentions Behind the Anti-Comintern Pact

On November 25, 1936, the Hirota government entered into the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany. This treaty held that its signatories would cooperate in the defense against the destructive activities of the Communist International (Comintern). Japan was entering into a closer relationship with Nazi Germany, but Hirota and the foreign

ministry were careful not to provoke other powers (particularly Britain) as they did so.

There were tensions with Britain over China and the economy, but Foreign Minister Arita was of the view that “Britain has major vested interests and power throughout the world. If we are to improve our nation’s international status, then we need to do all we can to improve our relations with her, or at least not make her into a full-on enemy.”⁵² This opinion seems to have been shared by Hirota.

It was Maj. Gen. Ōshima Hiroshi, military attaché at the Japanese embassy in Berlin, who spearheaded Japanese efforts on the Anti-Comintern Pact. Arita was “in favor of the fairly nebulous pact,” but European and Asian Affairs Bureau Director Tōgō opposed it on the grounds that it could be used for propaganda purposes by the Nazis. He was then “specifically warned by Prime Minister Hirota that the entire cabinet had agreed to the pact.”⁵³

As such, it is clear that Hirota was not opposed to the Anti-Comintern Pact. In fact, he sought to have China also join the pact as a means of improving Sino-Japanese relations. He had not yet completely abandoned the idea of a “Sino-Japanese partnership,” at least as he envisioned it.

Opposition to communism had been one of Hirota’s Three Principles, and the central place it held in his vision for foreign policy led to “new instructions ordering that Sino-Japanese negotiations be held on an anti-communist agreement with the goal of achieving de facto participation by the Nationalist government in the Anti-Comintern Pact.” It was reportedly “the prime minister’s earnest wish” that these be successful. But Chiang Kai-shek was not receptive to the idea; asserting that “Chinese efforts against communist are an internal Chinese matter,” he moved to wipe out the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on his own. According to Tajiri Akiyoshi, first secretary at the Japanese embassy in China, “it was only natural that [the Chinese] rejected Japan’s uncompromising idea of a joint defense against communism.”⁵⁴

But if participation by China had been part of Hirota’s support for the Anti-Comintern Pact, how did he view it in the absence of such involvement? Questioned on the pact after the war, he asserted that “No anti-communist treaty was signed while I was foreign minister. But War Minister Terauchi and Foreign Minister Arita pushed to have me reach one with Germany after I became prime minister.” He said that he made clear to the two that “even if we enter into an anti-communist agreement with Germany, it cannot be for a military purpose,” and that he had seen the pact “as a defense against Comintern propaganda.”

While this needs to be taken with a grain of salt given that he was being interrogated, Hirota also testified that he had viewed such a treaty with Germany negatively ever since serving as foreign minister. He further claimed that he had emphasized to Terauchi and Arita that the pact could not be the first step to the formation of a military alliance with Germany; he was concerned that that could potentially lead to a confrontation with Britain and the United States.⁵⁵ He believed that Japan needed to limit how much closer it became with Germany.

And yet, it would be difficult to deny that it was the Hirota government that laid the groundwork for what ultimately became the military alliance between Japan, Germany, and Italy. And the secret protocol to the Anti-Comintern Pact explicitly

targeted the Soviet Union. Japan would now need to take its relations with Germany into account when conducting its foreign policy. Chiang’s announcement that he would not participate in the pact seems to have lowered the priority that Hirota placed on a Sino-Japanese partnership.

That the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact led to a Soviet backlash goes without saying. According to Nishi Haruhiko, who became a counselor at the Japanese embassy in Moscow shortly after the pact was signed, “Soviet intelligence had discovered the content of the pact (including the secret protocol) even before it had been signed. Although the pact was not a military alliance, the Soviets saw it as the beginnings of one and strongly pushed against it.”⁵⁶ Soviet anger over the pact made them unwilling to revise the Soviet-Japanese treaty on fishing, a longstanding issue between the two countries. The treaty was instead only extended through a provisional agreement.

In what became known as the Xi’an Incident, Zhang Xueliang placed Chiang Kai-shek under house arrest on December 12 due to his continued attacks on the Chinese communists. After he was released, Chiang abandoned his civil war against the CCP and instead turned to opposing Japan. This Second United Front was an attempt to create a unified anti-Japanese effort in China. With its creation, there was no longer any chance whatsoever of Hirota’s Sino-Japanese partnership becoming a reality. Sino-Japanese relations were now on a hair trigger, and when Hirota reported on the situation to the Emperor, the Emperor warned that “we must be sure that we do not fail with China over small matters.”⁵⁷

The “Hara-Kiri Exchange”

Domestically, Finance Minister Baba was working to implement a tax increase to supplement the military budget during this time, despite the continued impoverishment of the country’s farming villages. An assassination plot against Hirota was also discovered in late November. Watanabe Hiroshi, an employee of the Daidō Investigation Agency in Fukushima, was arrested by police while scouting out the prime minister’s residence in possession of dynamite. Four accomplices were also arrested, and Watanabe stated under questioning that he had intended to assassinate Hirota “to save impoverished farmers.”⁵⁸

Having no vision for either the diplomatic or domestic fronts, by January 1937, Hirota was losing interest in leading the government. He told the Emperor that he felt “it would be appropriate for someone like Prince Konoe to form a new political party and bring some fresh air” to politics. Sino-Japanese talks had broken down, and the Chinese embassy told Nanjing that “Hirota has been completely deserted.”⁵⁹

It was the January 21, 1937 session of the House of Representatives—held in the newly completed Imperial Diet Building—that would lead to the fall of the Hirota government. Hamada Kunimatsu, a member of the Seiyūkai, gave a speech critical of the military, leading to a dispute with War Minister Terauchi.⁶⁰ Born in 1868 and a former president of the House of Representatives, Hamada was a veteran lawmaker.

Ultimately, the argument between Hamada and Terauchi resulted in what became known as the “hara-kiri exchange.”

Terauchi accused Hamada of insulting the military, to which Hamada rejoined: “Look through the record. If you can find anywhere that I insulted the military, I’ll make amends to you by committing hara-kiri. But if you can’t, then *you* commit hara-kiri.” This statement was met by the audience with laughter and applause.⁶¹

The speech that led to this exchange had not been aimed solely at Terauchi, however. After declaring, “I am certain that the governance of Japan cannot be maintained through complete reliance upon the military’s momentum and the ideas of fascists,” he attacked the government’s foreign policy, noting that “our policy towards China has completely broken down.” As such, Hamada should be seen as criticizing the Hirota government as a whole. The government was seen as favoring the military over the political parties.

The initial response to Hamada had been provided by Hirota, not Terauchi:

Since nearly the very beginning of this government, we have thoroughly considered how to renovate our foreign policy and implemented appropriate policies. The recent conclusion of the Anti-Comintern Pact was entirely based on that policy.

He also clearly stated that “we have no intention of engaging in ‘fascist’ politics.”

It was immediately after Hirota’s reply that the “hara-kiri exchange” began. The debate with Hamada infuriated Terauchi, and he demanded that Hirota dissolve the House of Representatives as a means of striking back at the political parties. This was opposed by the four cabinet officers from the parties, however, so the House was put into a recess instead.

Terauchi continued to heavily push for the dissolution, this time in the name of maintaining discipline in the military, but even Navy Minister Nagano was reluctant to agree with him. Terauchi threatened to resign if his demands were not met, and Hirota was thus put in a position where he could either dissolve the House of Representatives or his government would fall.

Resignation

Despite attempts by Nagano to persuade Terauchi to relent, Terauchi stubbornly refused to lift his demand that the House of Representatives be dissolved. Hirota thus chose to have his government resign. At the January 23 cabinet meeting, he addressed his cabinet:

I had made no preparations whatsoever when I received the mandate to form a government in the wake of the abnormal February 26 Incident. But I have used what little ability I possess and, thanks to the support of the army, navy, and the political parties, I have made it this far. I believe that recent political developments are beyond my ability to handle, however, so I wish to tender my resignation to the Emperor. I am deeply grateful, as always, for the assistance of each of you.

This final cabinet meeting—held just two days after the *hara-kiri* exchange—lasted only twenty minutes.⁶² Just before attending the meeting, Hirota had expressed his inner feelings to Harada Kumao at the prime minister's residence:

I've managed to make it this far [...], but I feel completely unable to fulfill that mandate given the current circumstances. I thus feel it would be appropriate to resign today. [...] It would be undesirable for the war and navy ministers to argue at the cabinet meeting.

The lack of unity in the cabinet stemming from Terauchi's hardline views caused the short-lived Hirota government to resign en masse on January 23. Hirota's comment that "it would be undesirable for the war and navy ministers to argue at the cabinet meeting" marked the close to his government with a passivity typical of him. Ironically, just as the Hirota government was collapsing after ten and a half months, Ambassador to Britain Yoshida was writing a letter explaining that Anglo-Japanese relations over China and trade were improving.⁶³

Hirota's government collapsed with few accomplishments to its name. And there are of course areas where we should empathize with him. Anyone becoming prime minister in the aftermath of the February 26 Incident would have faced difficulties and heavy pressure from the army. Hirota deserves praise for successfully forming a government despite army interference and ending the political vacuum that had lasted for ten days.

Even so, Hirota was behind the diplomatic actions taken by his government, including the move to establish closer relations with Germany rather than ease tensions with the Soviet Union as he had been expected to do. And while he attempted to strike a deal under which future prime ministers would be able to choose their war ministers in exchange for restoring the requirement that military ministers be active-duty officers, this agreement was ultimately left informal and unsubstantial. He also failed to make his "unified command" concept a reality. There is an undeniable sense that the Hirota government had a bright beginning and a dull finish.

If one were feeling generous, it could be said that he chose to resign rather than to succumb to Terauchi's baseless demand that the House of Representatives be dissolved. In general, however, a Tokyo *Asahi Shimbun* editorial published the day after his resignation was accurate in saying: "Prime Minister Hirota—the man with the crucial leadership role—had minimal presence, almost to the point of nonexistence."⁶⁴ While he had showed skill in assembling his cabinet and a desire to bring discipline back to the army, it must be said that he was a generally mediocre prime minister.

The Hirota government had few achievements. If pressed to name one, one could suggest his establishment of the Order of Culture, something that several previous governments had failed to do. This effort was backed by Shimojō Yasumaro, head of the Cabinet Decoration Bureau. The order's medal had originally been made in the shape of a cherry blossom at the government's request, but the Emperor said that "there are many things shaped like cherry blossoms; make it a mandarin orange blossom instead." The order's design was to be announced on January 4, but this was delayed to Empire Day (February 11). As the Hirota government resigned on

January 23, the announcement was thus made by the subsequent Hayashi Senjūrō government.⁶⁵

* * *

In April 1936, shortly after the formation of the Hirota government, the Kōkōkyo completed a new building in Suginami Ward. The inauguration ceremony for the new building was held in grand fashion, and a smiling Hirota made an appearance, as did Tōyama Mitsuru of the Gen'yōsha. Thirty years had already passed since he and Hirata had first established the Kōkōkyo in Koishikawa.

He spoke of his late friend at the ceremony, saying that “Hirata set a good example for us all, diligently engaging in activities, studies, and daily self-improvement.” He also discussed becoming prime minister: “I had received the mandate to form a government despite being unworthy. With everyone’s support, I intend to wholeheartedly devote myself to serving the nation to the best of my ability.” The younger members of the Kōkōkyo watched respectfully as he wrote the organization’s name on the plaque for the building.⁶⁶

This plaque—as well as the earlier ones written by Soejima and Yamaza – is still at the Kōkōkyo today, almost ninety years later. His beautiful brushwork still soothes the hearts of those who visit. That said, one must be a bit skeptical that Hirota truly “wholeheartedly” devoted himself to serving the nation.

Source Acronyms

JDRJapanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* [Japanese Diplomatic Records] (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1975–1992).

Notes

1. Okada Keisuke, *Okada Keisuke Kaikoroku* [Memoirs of Okada Keisuke] (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1987), 153–70.
2. Honjō Shigeru, *Honjō Nikki* [Honjō Diary] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1989), 275.
3. *Ibid.*, 284.
4. Harada Kumao, *Saionji-Kō to Seikyoku* [Prince Saionji and the Political Situation] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1951), 5:16–17.
5. Kido Kōichi, *Kido Kōichi Nikki* [The Diary of Kido Kōichi], ed. Kido Nikki Kenkyūkai (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1966), 1:474; Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 176–77.
6. Sonobe Yoshio, “Shōwa 10-Nendai no Kizokuin Kaikaku Mondai o Megutte” [Concerning the Issue of House of Peers Reform in the 1930s], *Nihon Rekishi* No. 447 (1985), 62–77; Shadan Hōjin Shōyū Kurabu, ed., *Sasaki Yukitada to Kizokuin Kaikaku* [Sasaki Yukitada and House of Peers Reform] (Tokyo: Fuyō Shobō, 1995), 99, 105, 107, 130, 173, 185–216, 384–88, 413; Watanabe Yukio, *Shūsō no Hito – Hirota Kōki* [Man of Hardship: Hirota Kōki] (Fukuoka:

- Ashishobō, 1998), 18, 127; Otabe Yūji, *Kazoku* [The Peerage] (Tokyo: Chūkō Shinsho, 2006), 16, 263–65.
7. Kido Nikki Kenkyūkai, ed., *Kido Kōichi Kankei Bunsho* [Documents Related to Kido Kōichi] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1966), 106–07. See also: Hayashi Shigeru, *Yuasa Kurahei* (Tokyo: Yuasa Kurahei Denki Kankōkai, 1969), 340–42.
 8. Awaya Kentarō, Yoshida Yutaka, eds., *Kokusai Kensatsukyoku (IPS) Jinmon Chōsho* [International Prosecution Service (IPS) Interrogation Records] (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Sentā, 1993), 28:401.
 9. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (May 5, 1936 Evening).
 10. Awaya 28:312, 382; See also: John G. Ruth, *Sugamo Jinmon Chōsho* [Sugamo Interrogation Records], ed. Higurashi Yoshinobu, trans. Yamada Yutaka (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun-sha, 1995), 206.
 11. Harada 5:63–64.
 12. Yoshida Shigeru, *Kaisō 10-Nen* [10 Year Memoirs] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1958), 1:40.
 13. *Ibid.*, 1:41.
 14. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (March 6, 1936; March 9, 1936; March 10, 1936 Evening); Ohara Naoshi, *Ohara Naoshi Kaikoroku* [Memoirs of Ohara Naoshi] (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1986), 235–39.
 15. Statement dictated by Hirota Kōki to Morishima Gorō (August 29, 1947), *Tōkyō Saiban Hirota Kōki Moto Shushō Bengo Shiryō*, 145. I was allowed to read this thanks to Sancha Shobō.
 16. Hata Ikuhiko, *Gun Fashizumu Undō-shi* [History of Military Fascist Movements] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1980), 171; Tsutsui Kiyotada, *Shōwa 10-Nendai no Rikugun to Seiji – Gunbu Daijin Gen’eki Bukan-sei no Kyojō to Jitsuzō* [The Army and Politics, 1935–44: The Facts and Fiction of the Active-Duty Officers Minister System] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007), 18–21.
 17. Fujinuma Shōhei, *Watashi no Isshō* [My Life] (Tokyo: Fujinuma Shōhei-chō “Watashi no Isshō” Kankōkai, 1957), 214–18. I have corrected an error in the date.
 18. Ōta Ken’ichi, et al., *Tsugita Daisaburō Nikki* [Diary of Tsugita Daisaburō] (Okayama: San’yō Shimbun, 1991), 164.
 19. Tsukada Masao, ed., *Hirota Naikaku* [The Hirota Government] (Tokyo: Hirota Naikaku Hensansho, 1936), 129, 138.
 20. Tamai Masao, “Kuroda Bushi Oboegaki” [Kuroda Bushi Memo], in Ebii Eiji, ed., *Furusato Bungakukan* No. 46 (Tokyo: Gyōsei, 1994), 243.
 21. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (March 10, 1936).
 22. Kanemaru Yūichi, ed., *Kōnichi/Hainichi Kankei Shiryō – Shanhai Shōkō Kaigisho “Kinyōkai Panfuretto”* [Historical Materials Related to the Anti-Japanese Movement: The Shanghai Chamber of Commerce’s “Kinyōkai Pamphlet”] (Tokyo: Yumani Shobō, 2007), 154, 194. On the restoration of the active-duty officer requirement, see: Katō Yōko, *Mosaku suru 1930-Nendai Nichibeiki Kankei to Rikugun Chūkensō* [Groping Through the 1930s: US-Japan Relations and Mid-Ranking Army Officers] (Tokyo: Yamakawa, 1993), 209–26; Tsutsui.
 23. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (March 9, 1936).
 24. Tsukada 142–44.
 25. Awaya 28:403.
 26. Yoshida 4:104.
 27. Harada 5:50.
 28. *Ibid.*, 5:84.
 29. Nihon Kindai Shiryō Kenkyūkai, ed., *Ōkura Kinmochi Nikki* [Diary of Ōkura Kinmochi] (Tokyo: Naiseishi Kenkyūkai, 1974), 3:190.
 30. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai 197–98; Katō 209–26; Tsutsui 31–57.
 31. Awaya 28:415. See also: Ōta 165; Ruth 182–84, 186; Awaya Kentarō, *Tōkyō Saiban e no Michi* [The Road to the Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2006), 2:163–64.
 32. Defense Agency, National Institute for Defense Studies, War History Office, *Senshi Sōsho – Shina Jihen Rikugun Sakusen* [War History Series: China Incident Army Operations] (Tokyo: Asagumo Shinbun-sha, 1975), 1:71–79.

33. Stenographical Record of the 69th Imperial Diet – House of Peers. See also: Tsukada 306–15.
34. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (May 6, 1936).
35. Stenographical Record of the 69th Imperial Diet – House of Peers, 62.
36. Shimada Toshihiko, Inaba Masao, eds., *Gendaishi Shiryō 8 Nichū Sensō I* [Modern Historical Materials 8 – Second Sino-Japanese War 1] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 1964), 356.
37. Defense Agency, National Institute for Defense Studies, War History Office, *Senshi Sōsho – Daihon’ei Rikugunbu* [War History Series: Imperial Headquarters Army Department] (Tokyo: Asagumo Shinbun-sha, 1975), 1:397.
38. Shimada 357–65.
39. Tōgō Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen* [Signs of the Times] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1985), 111.
40. JDR Shōwa-ki II Part 1, Vol. 5, 1:78–84.
41. Shimada 366–71.
42. Awaya, *IPS*, 28:407–08.
43. Shimada 190–348.
44. Awaya, *IPS*, 28:406.
45. *Ibid.*, 28:407.
46. Harada 5:146–47. See also: 5:175, 352–53.
47. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai 201–02, 241–44; Harada 5:164.
48. *Ibid.*, 5:164.
49. *Ibid.*, 5:168. See also: Chadani Seiichi, “2–26 Jiken-go no Kyūchū Seiryoku” [Power at the Imperial Court Following the 2–26 Incident,” *Shien* 68:1 (2007), 17–21.
50. Harada 5:201, 209.
51. *Ibid.*, 5:205.
52. Arita Hachirō, *Baka Hachi to Hito wa Iu – Gaikōkan no Kaisō* [I was Called “Baka Hachi” – Memories of a Diplomat] (Tokyo: Kōwadō, 1959), 78–79.
53. Tōgō 109. On the Anti-Comintern Pact, see also: Shimada Nobuo, *Nachizumu Kyokutō Senryaku* [The Nazi’s Far Eastern Strategy] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997). On Arita Hachiro, see also: Hattori Satoshi, “Arita Hachirō Gaishō to ‘Tōa Shin-chitsujo’” [Foreign Minister Arita Hachirō and the “New Order in East Asia”], in Hattori Ryūji, Tsuchida Tetsuo, and Gotō Harumi, eds., *Senkikan no Higashi Ajia Kokusai Seiji* (Tokyo: Chūō University, 2007), 501–52.
54. Tajiri Akiyoshi, *Tajiri Akiyoshi Kaisōroku – Hansei o Kaketa Chūgoku Gaikō no Kiroku* [The Memoirs of Tajiri Akiyoshi: A Record of the Half of My Life I Wagered on Diplomacy with China] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1977), 269–77.
55. Awaya, *IPS*, 28:408–10.
56. Nishi 39.
57. Harada 5:213.
58. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (December 1, 1936; December 9, 1936; January 19, 1937; March 11, 1937; March 18, 1938; February 9, 1939).
59. Harada 5:269; Hattori Ryūji, “Dai Ichiji Konoe Seimei Zengo no Kokumin Seifu Gaikōbu” [The Nationalist Government Foreign Ministry at the Time of the 1st Konoe Statement], in Satō Toyoshi, Li Enmin, eds., *Higashi Ajia Kyōdōtai no Kanosei – Nichū Kankei no Saikentō* (Ochanomizu Shobō, 2006), 58.
60. Stenographic Record of the 70th Imperial Diet – House of Representatives.
61. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (January 22, 1937).
62. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (January 23, 1937 Evening).
63. Harada 5:233–40.
64. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (January 24, 1937 Evening).
65. Fujinuma 219–20.
66. Shiokawa Takao, ed., *Kōkōkyo-shi* (Tokyo: Zaidan Hōjin Kōkōkyo, 1937), 3–6, 38–68, 88–104, 117–24, 145–49.

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Chapter 6

“We Will Not Deal with the Nationalist Government”—Foreign Minister During the Second Sino-Japanese War



Abstract This chapter looks at Hirota’s return as foreign minister from 1937 to 1938. This period saw the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the wake of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, and much of the chapter is dedicated to Hirota’s overseeing of the Japanese peace negotiations with China in the early months of the war. Hirota’s negotiations were closely tied to the increasingly populist nature of contemporary Japanese politics. Initial success in the war led to heightened popular expectations and he made increasingly severe demands of the Chinese, a trend that culminated in the Konoe Statement, a declaration that Japan would “no longer treat with” the existing Chinese government. Hirota’s inability to exercise leadership and hold firm in the face of popular and military pressure caused him to be unpopular within the foreign ministry and government. It would also notably cause him to take a largely passive role in response to the Nanjing Massacre; kept fully informed of developments in Nanjing, his reaction went no further than making occasional protests to the war ministry, and this failure to act would contribute greatly to his execution following the end of the war.

The Hayashi Government and the Failed Formation of the Ugaki Government

On January 25, 1937, two days after the resignation of the Hirota government, the mandate to form a new government fell to Ugaki Kazushige. An influential figure, Ugaki was a previous war minister and governor-general of Korea known as the “perennial prime minister candidate.” Ugaki was a moderate who had overseen a reduction in the size of the army a decade earlier. His selection was fiercely opposed by the middle ranks of the army, and he was unable to obtain a war minister, ultimately preventing him from forming a government. The Hirota government’s reinstatement of the active-duty officer restriction on war and navy ministers was already proving to be significant.

The Hayashi Senjūrō government was formed in February. Hayashi was a retired general and had served as war minister in the Saitō and Okada governments. The

new foreign minister, Satō Naotake, belonged to the foreign ministry's international faction and had previously served as director of the Japan Office of the League of Nations and as ambassador to France. He had joined the ministry a year before Hirota.

In what became known as the “dine and dash dissolution” (*kuinige kaisan*), the Hayashi government carried out a surprise dissolution of the House of Representatives as soon as it had passed a budget. Hayashi thus chose to take an increasingly confrontational stance toward the political parties. But while the position of the Minseitō and Seiyūkai had been weakening, they won an absolute majority in the April 30 general election, regaining their momentum. Viewing a motion of no confidence as inevitable, the Hayashi government resigned in late May. Hirota was also appointed to the House of Peers through an imperial appointment that same month but made no noteworthy moves.

Foreign Minister Satō's diplomatic efforts can likely be considered the only accomplishment to the Hayashi government's name. In what was effectively a move away from Hirota's foreign policy, Satō had conditioned his entrance to the cabinet on being allowed to improve Japan's strained relations with China and the Soviet Union.

After Hayashi agreed, Satō threw himself into improving Sino-Japanese relations. His basic policy toward China was that Japan should treat it as an equal, and that extreme efforts should be made to avoid armed conflict. He thus attempted to apply the brakes to the North China separation strategy. But the resignation of the Hayashi government meant that his time as head of Japan's foreign policy came to an end after only three months. Ironically, the incoming Konoe Fumimaro government would replace him with none other than Hirota, the man whose foreign policy he had strived to move away from.

Formation of the Konoe Government and Appointment as Foreign Minister

On June 4, the long-awaited Konoe government was finally born. Saionji had long had high expectations for Konoe and his appointment to prime minister at the young age of forty-five was welcomed by a wide swathe of society, including the public, the military, and the reformists. He was tremendously popular, and newspaper coverage raved about Prince Konoe, the young head of one of the Five Regent Houses, becoming premier.

Hirota, now serving in the House of Peers, rapidly emerged as a candidate to become foreign minister in the new government. But when sounded out by Yoshida Shigeru, Hirota was unenthusiastic about returning to the position. Even when approached directly by Konoe, he initially refused, saying, “I don't want to cause any trouble by joining the cabinet.”¹ During his first term as foreign minister, he had had little control over his subordinates and had been plagued by disputes with the

army. It had also been less than half a year since his government had fallen without achieving any significant accomplishments.

Konoe was persistent, however, and dispatched his secretary Atsuchi Morishige to Hirota to persuade him. And, even as he was meeting with Atsuchi, he received a phone call from Harada Kumao, Saionji Kinmochi's secretary. Like Atsuchi, Harada was asking Hirota to become foreign minister:

The Prince [Saionji] is extremely concerned about diplomatic matters and, as Prince Konoe also wants you to make vigorous efforts in this area, I humbly request that you accept the position. I pray that you will assist the still young Prince Konoe so that he may fulfill his responsibilities without any major disrepute or failures.

Hirota, however, remained unsure:

Hirota: Mr. Atsuchi, his secretary, happens to be here right now to negotiate. I have concerns that I would actually be causing problems for Prince Konoe were I to join the cabinet, however...

Harada: I don't think there's any way that could be true. I would like to again request that you make vigorous efforts on his behalf.

Hirota: In that case, I will accept.²

Hirota thus returned to the position of foreign minister after an absence of fourteen months. But the more politician-like aspects of his character, born from his youthful enjoyment of discussing politics, had completely disappeared.

Despite all these efforts made to recruit Hirota, it had actually been Nagai Ryūtarō, a Diet member from the Minseitō, who Konoe had initially put forward for the position of foreign minister. But while Nagai was known for being a skilled orator and had shown an interest in foreign policy, he would have been an unknown as minister. Konoe had a penchant for making odd personnel choices and would later name Suetsugu Nobumasa, a retired admiral, as home minister and Araki Sadao, one of the generals forced to retire following the February 26 Incident, as education minister.

Upon seeing Nagai's name on the list of prospective cabinet officers, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Yuasa Kurahei told Harada that "This is just too much. It needs to be Hirota or someone else like that." Saionji expressed similar concerns. After conferring with Harada, Konoe agreed that Hirota would be acceptable. Gen. Sugiyama Hajime, war minister in the Hayashi government, also informed Harada by phone that "I've already spoken to the prime minister to tell him that Hirota would be fine."³

Saionji had told Harada that he was "determined to go with Prince Konoe [as prime minister], and Prince Konoe alone." This was conveyed to Kido Kōichi, who was now head of the Imperial Household Ministry's Peerage Bureau. Saionji viewed Konoe as a kind of trump card, and he likely expected Hirota (who also now had experience being prime minister) to revert to his earlier moderate diplomatic course. At the same time, the army saw Hirota as someone who they could easily take advantage of; hence the approval voiced by Sugiyama (who would continue to serve as war minister in the new cabinet). Saionji hoped for a stable, orthodox government. But the combination of Konoe and Hirota would lead in a direction the exact opposite of his intentions.⁴

A Cool Reception for Hirota

The newly appointed Hirota headed to the foreign ministry, where Satō yielded the position of minister to him. Having only been in the position for three months, Satō was still eager to improve relations with China. In contrast, the returning Hirota had little enthusiasm for the task. Satō attempted to entrust Hirota with overseeing the improvement in foreign relations that he himself would be unable to accomplish, but Hirota was unreceptive.

The dumbfounded Satō later described the scene:

I spent a full two hours with Hirota going over my work with him. But he did nothing over the following thirty days to move in the direction that I had been pursuing. And then the Marco Polo Bridge Incident happened.

By “the direction that I had been pursuing,” Satō was likely referring to his pursuit of a breakthrough in Sino-Japanese relations. He had been working to correct the diplomatic course introduced by Hirota and the worsened relations with China and the Soviet Union it had brought, but Hirota had little interest in taking on that work. That Hirota “did nothing” in the lead up to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident was extremely painful for Satō.⁵

That said, Satō’s version of the situation may be a little too harsh on Hirota. Hirota did, in fact, attempt to curb the North China separation strategy that was spiraling out of control and to improve relations with Britain (who had major vested interests in China). Hirota “issued the necessary instructions to Ambassador to Britain Yoshida Shigeru [to improve relations]. Unfortunately, however, administrative talks between Japanese officials in London and Tokyo [on the subject] were still ongoing when the Marco Polo Bridge Incident occurred on July 7.”⁶

Hirota left the major figures in the foreign ministry in place as he resumed the post of minister. They were: Vice-Minister Horinouchi Kensuke, East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Ishii Itarō, European and Asian Affairs Bureau Director Tōgō Shigenori, American Affairs Bureau Director Yoshizawa Seijirō, Commercial Affairs Bureau Director Matsushima Shikao, Treaty Bureau Director Mitani Takanobu, and Information Department Director Kawai Tatsuo.

The key matter of relations with China fell under the remit of the East Asian Affairs Bureau. Ishii, that bureau’s director, did not welcome Hirota’s return:

I had first heard that he would be serving as deputy prime minister in the cabinet, but when Hirota became foreign minister, I felt no sense of freshness or vigor from him. I had respected him ever since my time working in Washington and had had great expectations for him, but that had rapidly diminished over the previous few years. I had become disillusioned by his weakness a year earlier when he formed his government. He had submissively acceded to the military’s demands and reinstated the active-duty officer restriction for the positions of war and navy minister. I had absolutely no doubt that he was, at heart, a pacifist who believed in international cooperation. But I also saw him as someone who was incapable of standing up to either the military or the right-wing.⁷

Ugaki, who had been prevented from succeeding Hirota as prime minister half a year earlier, wrote a scathing appraisal of him in his diary:

Hirota's diplomatic skills have already been tested. As foreign minister, he proved incapable of rebuilding our foreign policy; and as prime minister, he proved unable to provide the necessary guidance for others to carry out that task.⁸

The Second Sino-Japanese War turned Ishii and Ugaki's concerns into a reality. And the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the event that would become the trigger for the war, occurred only thirty-three days into Konoe's tenure as prime minister.

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident

The 8th Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment of the China Garrison Army was conducting night exercises on July 7, 1937 at the Marco Polo Bridge in the north-west outskirts of Beiping when it heard gunfire from the position of the Chinese 29th Army. Assembling, it found one soldier missing. While this soldier soon reported to his unit, Col. Mutaguchi Ren'ya, the regimental commander, ordered the deployment of the 3rd Battalion, resulting in combat between the Chinese and Japanese forces.

Even so, a ceasefire agreement was reached on July 11 in Beiping. General Song Zheyuan, commander of the 29th Army and chairman of the Hebei-Chahar Political Council, took the lead for the Chinese in the ceasefire negotiations and adhered to Chiang Kai-shek's policy of "no loss of sovereignty and no loss of territory." The Konoe government decided that same day to mobilize five divisions, however, three immediately. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident may have been accidental, but the decision to expand the front line was not.⁹

How did Hirota respond to the crisis? He was at his villa in Kugenuma when the incident occurred and received a phone call that night "from the foreign ministry in Tokyo informing me that the Chinese army had opened fire on the Japanese army, and that the two forces were engaged in combat outside of Beiping."¹⁰ After a shocked Hirota arrived at the ministry the following morning and discussed the matter with Horinouchi, Ishii, and Tōgō, he decided that "the matter was to be settled locally and not escalated." He expected negotiations on-site to resolve the incident and did not believe that it would become a bigger concern.¹¹

At a cabinet meeting on the 9th, War Minister Sugiyama pushed for dispatching three divisions from the home islands, but "this was opposed by Foreign Minister Hirota in particular, who argued that there would be no need [for additional forces] if the matter could be resolved locally without any escalation."¹² Hirota thus worked to contain the incident. With Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa also opposed to sending troops, the Konoe government adopted a policy of non-escalation toward the incident.

Hirota then issued instructions to Consul-General Katō Denjirō in Beiping:

The Imperial government naturally has no intention of making matters worse, but I want you to kindly explain things to the Chinese authorities and strongly request that they take steps to rapidly bring things under control, as the development of the incident will be dependent on their attitude.¹³

Just as Hirota had hoped, the local negotiations resulted in the previously mentioned ceasefire on July 11. Under this agreement, those Chinese figures responsible for the incident would be punished, the Chinese army would withdraw from the Marco Polo Bridge, and anti-Japanese organizations like the Chinese Communist Party would be suppressed. Even so, the Japanese army leadership continued to push for troops to be sent to China. July 11 was a Sunday, and Hirota had returned to his villa to rest for the weekend when he was summoned back to the capital.

It had been Chief Cabinet Secretary Kazami Akira who had summoned Hirota. In his diary, Kazami complained about Hirota's decision to return to Kugenuma despite the ongoing emergency, lamenting that “all of the foreign ministry leaders, even the minister, are clearly optimistic about the situation in northern China.”¹⁴ Back in Tokyo, Hirota consulted with Horinouchi, Ishii, and Tōgō and agreed to oppose the army's mobilization plans. He then attended the five-minister conference and the cabinet meeting.

It was at these meetings that War Minister Sugiyama pushed for the mobilization of five divisions, three immediately, to which Konoe and Hirota readily agreed. Hirota did put up a token resistance at the five-minister conference, suggesting that “a ceasefire agreement may be reached in the near future, so why not wait for the outcome of those negotiations?” His words did not find a receptive audience, however.¹⁵ Agriculture Minister Arima Yoriyasu complained in his diary that “the prime minister has made things difficult for the foreign and finance ministries as of late and shown a strong tendency to be influenced by the military.”¹⁶ The war minister was able to direct Konoe, and he, in turn, pulled Hirota in his wake.

Konoe's “Initiative Theory”

Returning to the foreign ministry from the cabinet meeting, Hirota attempted to justify the decision:

The plan is conditional; troops will only be mobilized where necessary for the protection of residents and for the defense of local forces. It is only a preparatory plan for mobilization in an emergency. As such, it was approved without any ideological objections.

This did not stem Ishii and Hirota's other subordinates' disappointment in him. Ishii wrote, “We've allowed the military to score without offering any resistance.”¹⁷

Following the cabinet decision, the army general staff issued orders to the Kwantung and Korean Armies to dispatch troops to China. This was the first mobilization. Importantly, this deployment was not an independent action taken by the army in the name of the Emperor's command authority; it had been approved by the Konoe government. And in fact, while Konoe had initially been hesitant about what to do, he would increasingly adopt a hardline stance from this point on. At this time, it was actually Navy Minister Yonai who was the most in favor of caution.

Even as Hirota told his subordinates that this was merely a “preparatory mobilization plan,” Konoe was inviting reporters and businessmen to the prime minister's

residence on almost a daily basis, declaring his intention to send troops to northern China and asking for their cooperation. Konoe had frequently had to play catchup to the army, and this was an attempt by him to get in front and regain the initiative. This has been referred to as his “initiative theory,” and the prime minister’s residence became a place of celebration.

We must recognize that, by working to stir up war fever among the public, Konoe was overturning the policy of non-escalation that he himself had put into place. And he began to drag Hirota along with him. This inflammatory strategy had been proposed to Konoe by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kazami, who had previously worked as a reporter for the Osaka Asahi Shimbun and Kokusai Tsūshinsha and as chief editor for the Shinano Mainichi Shimbun.¹⁸ From July 11 on, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident began to be known as the “North China Incident” (Hokushi Jihen).

Konoe was not a capable leader, and yet he now worked to stir up the public so as to gain their enthusiastic support; it was possible that the war situation would spiral out of his control. Prime Minister Wakatsuki may have proved incapable of containing the Manchurian Incident six years earlier, but at least he had not personally enflamed popular opinion in its support. Hirota was a former diplomat, foreign minister, and prime minister, as well as twelve years older than the inexperienced Konoe. It should have been his place to try to rein him in.

And yet, Hirota’s subordinates seem to have had a better grasp on the dangers of Konoe-style populism than Hirota did. According to East Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Kamimura Shin’ichi:

Every time the government takes one step forward, the hardline faction goes one or two steps beyond that. This is more than just playing with fire; the government doesn’t have the power to rein them in. That the incompetent Prince Konoe believes that he can control the army with his cheap tricks shows that he doesn’t realize his own limitations.

Rather than chastise Konoe for “playing with fire,” however, Hirota tended to go along with his actions. During the Manchurian Incident, the Wakatsuki government’s policy of non-escalation had been destroyed by the rogue actions of the Kwantung Army. But during the Second Sino-Japanese War, it was the Konoe government who unilaterally decided to expand the conflict by sending troops to China, effectively expanding the conflict and rejecting a local ceasefire. Hirota ultimately gave his consent to this action, albeit unenthusiastically. He had changed greatly from the man who had declared “there will be no war while I am in office” during his first term as foreign minister.¹⁹

Disappointment of Hirota’s Subordinates

At the five-minister conference on July 17, War Minister Sugiyama put forward an uncompromising plan under which Japan would demand a formal apology from Song Zheyuan, punishment of those involved, and the withdrawal of Chinese forces. Should this not be done within the stipulated timeframe, the Chinese army would be

“punished.” While Hirota opposed the imposition of a time limit on the negotiations with the Nationalist government, the army’s plan was approved including, ultimately, by Hirota. Konoe was not present at this meeting due to illness.

Hirota’s subordinates were disappointed by the halfhearted nature of his opposition. Ishii wrote in his diary that “I never believed Foreign Minister Hirota to be such an opportunist and so unprincipled. It truly struck me how unfortunate it is that Japan has a foreign minister like him in an emergency, particularly one like this.”²⁰

The five-minister conference may have approved the army’s plan, but—just as Ishii had feared—there was no way that China would accept such draconian conditions. In what came to be referred to as the “Limit of Endurance Speech,” Chiang Kai-shek gathered prominent figures from Chinese society at Lushan and called for a war of total resistance against Japan. He argued that the Marco Polo Bridge Incident called into question “the existence of the nation as a whole” and that China had reached its “limit of endurance.”²¹

The cabinet met three times on July 20, and it was decided that three divisions would be sent to northern China from the home islands. This was the second mobilization. Hirota was initially critical of sending troops but, again, ultimately gave his approval. Home Minister Baba Eiichi complained to Harada that “Foreign Minister Hirota was overly passive, remaining silent despite the importance of the occasion. Even as an amateur in these matters, I felt extremely irritated.” Prime Minister Konoe himself noted that “the foreign ministry is aghast at Mr. Hirota’s passivity, and the lower-ranking officials are ready to carry out sabotage.”²²

Prior to these meetings, Bureau Director Ishii and Section Director Kamimura had submitted written petitions to Hirota opposing the sending of troops and beseeching him to strenuously resist such efforts. And yet, upon his return, Hirota informed Ishii that the dispatch had been approved without any particular debate.

Disgusted with the apathetic Hirota, Ishii and Kamimura submitted their resignations the following day. The earnest Ishii prefaced his resignation with a declaration that “I do this because your decision to approve the dispatch of troops contrary to the recommendations and petitions of your staff displays nothing less than a lack of confidence in us.”

This provoked a rare display of emotion from Hirota: “Shut up! You don’t get to speak when you know nothing about the situation at the meetings!”

But when this failed to cause Ishii to back down and retract his resignation and instead only drew a response of “I am sorry to have upset you,” Hirota suddenly gave a softer response:

The war minister has stated that, even with the mobilization, he will not dispatch any troops unless the situation becomes urgent. Things on the ground seem close to reaching a resolution, so please withdraw your resignation and wait a bit to see how things play out.

The complete change in Hirota’s demeanor and his earnest entreaty caused Ishii and Kamimura to lose the will to resign. But while he had managed to get them to withdraw their resignations, it would be hard to deny that Hirota’s subordinates had given up on him.²³

Hirota was losing the drive to stand up to the army’s aggressiveness toward China and the contemporary trends supporting it. He had attempted to minimize this with his statement that, while mobilization had been authorized, whether troops would actually be sent or not would depend upon the situation. But a diplomat must be able to make levelheaded decisions and maintain their distance from populism and public opinion, particularly in volatile situations. And Hirota proved unable to do that in this critical moment.

The three divisions ultimately *were* dispatched, and additional war expenditures were approved by the Konoe government. When questioned after the war as to whether the army’s actions could have been curtailed by cutting off its funding, Hirota frankly acknowledged that it could have: “Yes, I think so.” As such, it has to be recognized that his acceptance of the additional funding was done with the knowledge that budgetary measures were one effective means of checking the army.²⁴

“Hirota Is Rather Weak”

The Japanese army’s offensive on Beiping and Tianjin—launched on July 28—received major coverage in the Japanese press, with newspapers running headlines like “Imperial Army Invincible – Military Achievements from the First Day of the Punishment of Vicious China.”²⁵ On the following day, Chinese troops of the Peace Preservation Corps stationed in Tongzhou (capital of the East Hebei Autonomous Anti-Communist Government) mutinied, killing about two hundred Japanese residents in what became known as the Tongzhou Mutiny. Hirota donated twenty thousand yen to the “foreign minister relief fund” to help the local Japanese recover.²⁶

Konoe had been considering going to Nanjing and approached Chief Cabinet Secretary Kazami about sending Hirota first as a way of testing the waters. But when Kazami visited Hirota’s home, this idea was bluntly rejected. Smoking a pipe as Kazami made his pitch, Hirota only replied, “Well, I don’t think that would accomplish anything.”

Kazami realized that there was no point in discussing the matter further, and the idea of a visit by Hirota was shelved.²⁷ When Saionji learned of the idea, he told Harada that “the Chinese distrust Hirota. Wouldn’t it be much better to have Konoe go himself?”²⁸

With Hirota eliminated as a possibility, Konoe next attempted to have Hirota’s confidante Tōyama Mitsuru of the Gen’yōsha—an old acquaintance of Chiang’s—visit China as a cabinet councilor. This position was an advisor to the prime minister and was treated as equivalent to a cabinet officer in status. Konoe noted that “Tōyama and Chiang Kai-shek have long gotten along extremely well” and suggested that “as Tōyama is very close to Hirota, why not leave it to those two?”²⁹

Hirota accordingly approached Tōyama about the idea and received his informal acceptance. Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Yuasa Kurahei viewed Tōyama as “little more than a common street hoodlum,” however, and put an end to the idea. In a great loss of face for Tōyama, not only was he not sent to China, but the appointment as

a cabinet councilor was rescinded as well. Hirota was deeply indebted to Tōyama, and Konoe had also wanted him to go to China. And yet there is no evidence that Hirota stood up to Yuasa and pushed to get Tōyama the appointment.³⁰

Not wanting to go himself and having given up on Tōyama, Hirota now turned to his former foreign minister, Arita Hachirō. Calling Arita to his villa, he made his proposal:

You have recent experience as foreign minister, so could you go to Shanghai? You don't need to do anything there; I suspect that even if you don't say anything, just being there will lead to various people approaching you, particularly from Nanjing. And I believe that that will serve as the first step towards opening negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek.

It was an extraordinarily vague plan and, due to interference from the army, Arita ultimately was only able to observe northern China from the Soviet-Manchukuoan border. He waited there for instructions, but as Hirota never contacted him, he never even made it to Shanghai.³¹

The situation in China was critical, and yet Hirota showed no sense of urgency. This made him unpopular, and there were rumors that Konoe was going to replace him. Tōyama worked to suppress calls by Diet Member Nakano Seigō (a graduate of the Shūyūkan) and journalist Tokutomi Sohō for Hirota's dismissal.

Tōyama also spoke with Ogawa Heikichi, a former justice minister, and told him:

Foreign Minister Hirota is unpopular, but I hope that he remains in office; there is no one else suitable for the position. I would ask you to advise Prince Konoe that if he does decide to dismiss Hirota that he should request his resignation personally.

Tōyama had been watching over Hirota since his time as a student at the First High School. And even now, in his old age, he continued to try to do what he could to shield Hirota from harm, believing that he still had a future.

Upon learning of Tōyama's advice from Ogawa, Konoe muttered that “Hirota is rather weak and not at all resolute like his name implies.” But he did not take steps to dismiss him.³² This is another area where Hirota needs to be grateful to Tōyama and, by extension, the Gen'yōsha.

Excessive Peace Terms

Despite his half-heartedness, Hirota had not completely given up on reaching a peace with Chiang Kai-shek. During early August, while the conflict was still limited to northern China, Hirota and Ishii attempted to bring it to a close on “generous” terms.

This peace effort was entrusted to Funatsu Tatsuichirō, general director of the Japanese Spinners in China Trade Association and a former consul-general in Shanghai, which has led to it being known as the “Funatsu Operation.” Ishii was more enthusiastic about the idea than Hirota. Ishii visited Funatsu and “finally convinced him after bringing another entreaty from Minister Hirota.”³³ Funatsu then headed to Shanghai at their request.

Hirota also ordered Ambassador to China Kawagoe Shigeru, who had evacuated to northern China, to return to Shanghai. During this period, the Japanese embassy was in Shanghai, where it was located in the same building as the city's Japanese consulate. The Chinese capital of Nanjing only had a consulate, which kept in close communication with Shanghai.³⁴

On August 7, Hirota instructed Kawagoe that "after giving consideration of the various factors involved, it would be preferable if the ceasefire negotiations were initiated by a Chinese proposal." He also informed him that Gao Zongwu, who was to meet with Funatsu in secret, would be putting forward an approach for a ceasefire. Which is to say, Hirota hoped to achieve peace by having Gao propose a ceasefire to Kawagoe going through Funatsu.³⁵

Gao was head of the Nationalist foreign ministry's Asian Affairs Bureau and was close to Funatsu. Funatsu made contact with Gao on August 9. Later that day, Kawagoe returned to Shanghai and took over the discussions from Funatsu.

The Ōyama Incident occurred that same evening, however, when Sub-lieutenant Ōyama Isao and Seaman First Class Saitō Yōzō of the Shanghai Special Naval Landing Forces were killed by the Peace Preservation Corps (a local paramilitary police force) near Shanghai's airport.³⁶ This incident expanded the frontline of the Second Sino-Japanese War from northern China to Shanghai and brought Kawagoe's peace negotiations to a halt.

The Ōyama Incident was an unexpected and unfortunate development for Hirota. However, it should not be assumed that Kawagoe's negotiations would have been successful even in its absence.

Hirota had conveyed a wide-ranging set of peace conditions to Kawagoe: the establishment of a demilitarized zone from Beijing to Tianjin, recognition of Manchukuo or at least "a promise to not make [its existence] an issue in the future," and the conclusion of a "Sino-Japanese anti-communist pact." He sought to use the pressure provided by the ongoing military conflict to resolve longstanding issues to Japan's advantage.

Hirota flattered himself that the conditions were such that "even the Chinese will likely be surprised by the generosity here adopted by the government, and all the world will admire the Empire's fairness and impartiality."³⁷ "Generous" though they may be in his eyes, however, the Chinese would clearly find them excessive. It is difficult to believe that the Chinese would have accepted Hirota's conditions unaltered even had the negotiations continued.

On August 13, the Kono government approved the dispatch of two divisions from the home islands to Shanghai. Hirota instructed Kawagoe to negotiate with the Nationalist government to resolve the critical situation. However, the Battle of Shanghai began that same day, and the Japanese navy bombed the city on August 15. The Sino-Japanese talks were halted, and Japanese consulate in Nanjing's personnel were withdrawn the following day.³⁸ Hirota's efforts had been overtaken by events on the ground.

Ineffective Propaganda

Hirota met with Chinese Ambassador Xu Shiyong on August 14. He criticized China at the meeting, saying that “the Chinese attitude is the complete opposite of the Imperial government’s policy of non-expansion.” He also declared that “I believe the time has finally come for the recognition of Manchukuo.”³⁹

He sought to use the “North China Incident” and the Battle of Shanghai to pressure China into recognizing Manchukuo. And yet he must have been well aware from his past experiences that China was willing to go no further than “not questioning” the Japanese puppet state.

With all-out conflict between the Chinese and Japanese armies now inevitable, the Konoe government issued a statement on August 15. This held that the Nationalist government “has increasingly shown disdain for Japan in collusion with the forces of communization.” Japan therefore had “no choice but to take decisive measures to punish the viciousness of the Chinese army and force the Nanjing government to reflect upon its actions.”⁴⁰

This “punishment” statement was first proposed by War Minister Sugiyama at the cabinet meeting held on the 14th. Hirota had opposed the idea, but with Navy Minister Yonai now supporting military action to the point that he was proposing that Japan occupy Shanghai, its adoption was inevitable. The most that Hirota was able to do was to amend the language to reference the “forces of communization” rather than those of “communism.” He believed that the latter would make it seem as if Japan viewed the Soviet Union as the enemy, while former would be interpreted as a reference to the Chinese Communist Party.⁴¹ This did not prevent the Soviets from seeing Hirota as increasingly exhibiting anti-Soviet tendencies, however.⁴²

On August 17, the Konoe government formally abandoned its policy of non-expansion, and the Japanese army began landing at Shanghai on August 23. The government accordingly began referring to the “North China Incident” as the “China Incident” on September 2. Hirota spent this period attempting to convince the West that “provocative actions by the Chinese” had sparked the conflict and that Japan had no territorial ambitions.⁴³

As part of this effort, Hirota sent Privy Councilor Ishii Kikujirō, a former foreign minister, to visit Britain, France, and Italy. But his subordinate Ishii was critical of the move:

Had such an action been capable of influencing public opinion within the great powers, then it would have been worth the expense. As things were, I had no interest in it whatsoever. I saw it as public funds wasted for the sake of easing [Hirota’s] mind.⁴⁴

Hirota did what he could to propagandize overseas, but the limits of these efforts were clear; other nations saw them as obvious attempts to paper over Japan’s expansionism. During this time, Konoe told Agriculture Minister Arima that “the war minister has strongly requested that the foreign minister be replaced.”⁴⁵

The Brussels Conference and Trautmann Mediation

The international community was becoming increasingly critical of Japan, and Hirota's efforts toward propaganda were unable to stem that tide. On September 28, 1937, the League of Nations Assembly unanimously passed a resolution condemning Japan's bombing of Chinese cities. The US Department of State also declared that Japan's actions were in violation of the Nine-Power Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. The former, adopted in 1922 at the Washington Naval Conference, had stipulated that the signatories would respect China's sovereignty and the principle of the Open Door.

After consulting with the United States, Britain proposed holding a conference of that treaty's signatories in Brussels to discuss the Second Sino-Japanese War. Belgian Ambassador de Bassompierre provided Hirota with an invitation to this conference on October 21. Belgium had few interests in China, and it was believed that it could be impartial in the conflict. But when the matter was raised at the cabinet meeting on the following morning, "the foreign minister's proposal that Japan not attend the Nine-Power Treaty conference was approved."⁴⁶

Hirota informed the Belgian ambassador on October 27 that Japan would not be participating. According to Hirota, Japan's actions in China fell far outside of the treaty's scope as they were "self-defensive measures" provoked by China's use of force and its continued "anti-Japanese policies." This was an admittedly far-fetched claim, but it is not as if the powers were committed to sanctioning Japan at that point. As such, while the conference was held in November, it produced few concrete results.

It was not international conferences that Hirota hoped for from the powers, but rather their mediation. When informing British Ambassador Craigie and American Ambassador Grew that Japan would not be participating in Brussels, Hirota suggested that it "would be desirable if they could convince the Nanjing government or Chiang Kai-shek to favor direct negotiations between China and Japan."⁴⁷

But while he sought assistance from all ambassadors to Japan, it was bridge-building by Germany, who had strong ties to both combatants, that Hirota found especially valuable. German Ambassador Herbert von Dirksen was close to Hirota, as both men had served as ambassadors to the Soviet Union at the same time.⁴⁸ On October 21, Hirota requested von Dirksen's intervention with the Chinese; this was then conveyed to Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Chen Jie by German Ambassador to China Oskar Trautmann. This peace effort involving Germany is generally known as the "Trautmann Mediation."

On November 2, Hirota put forward seven peace conditions to von Dirksen. These were: establishment of an autonomous Mongolian government; creation of a demilitarized zone in northern China; expansion of the demilitarized zone in Shanghai; elimination of anti-Japanese policies; a joint defense against communism; reduction of tariffs on Japanese goods; and respect for the rights of foreigners in China. Chiang initially rejected the idea of any negotiations with Japan, but he decided to respond to Hirota's peace proposal after the Brussels Conference failed to produce any results.⁴⁹

Hirota had higher expectations for mediation efforts by Italy and especially Germany than those by America or Britain. I would like to suggest two reasons for this. First, with Mussolini's Italy signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact on November 6, the ideological partnership between Italy, Germany, and Japan had taken on an anti-British flavor in addition to its opposition to communism. Second, Germany and Italy were moving toward formally recognizing Manchukuo.

Hirota discussed this second point with Harada Kumao in mid-November:

Germany may grant recognition to Manchukuo on November 25 or so. Spain wants recognition for its new government, and if we recognize them, they will reciprocate for Manchukuo. Italy will also follow suit. This means that, even without insisting on Chinese recognition, we will have created an atmosphere where the powers will have recognized it, and we can thus focus on other, more important conditions. In other words, I don't intend to make [Chinese recognition of Manchukuo] a peace condition as we will be able to put forward other, more significant items.⁵⁰

Hirota believed that German, Italian, and Spanish recognition of Manchukuo would enable Japan to impose harsher peace conditions on China.

Italy and Germany recognized Manchukuo in November 1937 and May 1938, respectively. And Japan recognized the Franco regime in Spain in December 1937 in exchange for Spanish recognition of Manchukuo. What stands out here is that as Hirota worked to increase the legitimacy of the Japan-focused regional order, he also attempted to use that as a means of coercing China.

Shidehara's Concerns

A former senior figure at the foreign minister came to see Hirota, concerned about his foreign policy: Shidehara Kijūrō. While no longer in government service, he was worried that even with the Shanghai front seemingly in a stalemate, the prospects for peace were not improving.

Unable to just stand by and watch, he attempted to convince Hirota to reach a peace agreement with the Chinese before the Japanese military went beyond Shanghai and attacked Nanjing:

There certainly seems to also be those on the Chinese side passionate about reaching a peaceful solution between [our two countries]. It is perhaps not the best phrasing to say that this is something that you could use, but I think you all should consider this more carefully.

Shidehara had independent sources of information on the state of discussions with China; not just Trautmann, but also Wu Tiecheng, the governor of Guangdong and a former mayor of Shanghai. Hirota was not inclined to pay heed to Shidehara, however, and dispatched his secretary to deliver a message soon afterwards:

I've spoken to the war minister, and he told me that it would be impossible to carry out such discussions before the army has taken Nanjing. To do so now, as Japan is entangled in riverine combat, would be interpreted as an expression of weakness. But it would be acceptable to hold such talks after we've crushed the enemy. The war minister therefore insists on the occupation of Nanjing as a prerequisite for such discussions.

In his message, Hirota merely conveyed Sugiyama's views. Shidehara immediately replied:

No, that would be too late. Once Japan enters Nanjing, I'll have no idea where Wu Tiecheng is. He'll probably flee somewhere further inland, and we'll lose the ability to contact him. Besides, just as face is important for Japan, the same is true of China. It's not a feasible proposition.

Shidehara was attempting to explain that peace overtures needed to be made before the Japanese army attacked Nanjing, as China's pride would not allow it to respond to them after that point. But Hirota continued to ignore his advice. And on November 12, the Japanese army—having occupied Shanghai—began its march on Nanjing.⁵¹

Hirota's relationship with Shidehara had always been a delicate one; his rise in prominence in the foreign ministry in the 1930s was due to the distance he had maintained from the Shidehara faction. But it seems likely that he later came to regret not listening to Shidehara's advice on this occasion. On November 20, Imperial General Headquarters was established as the supreme command authority, operating directly under the Emperor.

Additional Peace Conditions

With the Japanese army closing in on Nanjing, Chiang Kai-shek told Trautmann on December 2 that he was prepared to enter into negotiations on the basis of the peace conditions that Hirota had provided to von Dirksen a month earlier. Von Dirksen was informed in Tokyo, but the Japanese army continued to advance as this happened.

Hirota met with von Dirksen on December 7, the same day that Chiang and his wife Soong Mei-ling fled Nanjing. Von Dirksen passed on Chiang's words that "the Chinese will approach the peace talks with a spirit of reconciliation and hopes that the Japanese will do the same." Concerned by those in Japan arguing that the Nationalist government should be repudiated, von Dirksen also warned Hirota that the fall of the Nationalist government would be disadvantageous to Japan as it would lead to the expansion of the Chinese Communist Party.

An unreceptive Hirota countered that:

While we were the first to put forward peace conditions, more than a month has passed since then, and the war situation has progressed greatly. The Japanese people's feelings towards China have also changed. They demand that Sino-Japanese relations be rebuilt from the ground up.

In other words, he was saying that it would be difficult to negotiate under the previously presented terms given the Japanese military's rapid advance and the consequent heightened popular expectations for the peace terms.⁵²

The Konoe government thus reexamined its conditions for peace at a cabinet meeting. Hirota was the first to speak, arguing that "given the sacrifices made thus far, it would be difficult to accept such light conditions." It must be recognized that it was Hirota who took the initiative in increasing the harshness of Japan's

peace conditions, even before the army did so. War Minister Sugiyama then voiced a similar view, and Konoe gave his agreement. The cabinet “reached the conclusion that [China’s] words were impudent coming from a vanquished party” and decided that Japan could not negotiate on the basis of its previous conditions.⁵³

It is likely that the hardening of Hirota and the rest of the cabinet’s attitudes was caused by changes in public opinion, which had been whipped up by the greatly favorable turn in the war situation. A December 6 editorial in the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* on the Trautmann Mediation argued that “Germany understands Japan’s true intentions, and it is impossible to believe that it would embark on any mediation that Japan would find unwelcome. This is seen in the German government’s recent ending of its mediation efforts.” It also held that “the fall of Nanjing, now finally in front of us, will demarcate a grand new stage for the war situation” and that “it is only natural that the question of whether to repudiate the Chiang Kai-shek regime has begun to be asked.”⁵⁴ Each newspaper tried to outdo each other in its wide coverage and photographs of the advance of advance of the “Imperial army.”

With the fall of Nanjing imminent, the Tokyo Municipal Education Bureau distributed 400,000 handheld flags and 15,000 paper lanterns to the city’s elementary schools in preparation for a victory parade. Some, too impatient to wait, had already begun hanging victory banners in areas of Ginza, Kanda, Ueno, and Shinjuku. “Flags of all sizes reading ‘Celebrating the Fall of Nanjing’ fluttered impatiently, and a riot of bright red and white paper lanterns illuminated the faces of the bustling crowd as they passed by in the evening darkness.”⁵⁵

It seems extraordinarily unlikely that this swelling of popular opinion would have failed to affect Hirota and Konoe. It had been the Konoe government who had worked to stir up public support for the war in the first place, and that had now rebounded against them. At the December 10 cabinet meeting, the government was strongly inclined to repudiate Chiang’s government:

The foreign minister gave a frank report on a telegram about the meeting between the German ambassador and Chiang Kai-shek. The colonial and education ministers were of the opinion that the Chiang regime should be repudiated. When Nanjing fell, the prime minister issued a statement at 4 o’clock saying that the government would accept a surrender but reject anything else.⁵⁶

The words “when Nanjing fell” seem to indicate that this was a new policy put forward after the capture of the city.⁵⁷

Konoe issued a statement following Nanjing’s fall declaring that “having abandoned the four great cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Nanjing, and Shanghai, the Nationalist government is like a shadow, without substance” but that “should a new government, one that moves in the correct direction, be established after the destruction of the Nationalist government, then Japan would work alongside it to devise concrete measures toward coexistence and mutual prosperity.”⁵⁸

A Different Face Shown to Britain and America

But even as Japan was hardening its position toward China, Hirota was also striving to avoid provoking the United States and Britain. After Japanese artillery fired upon the British gunboat *HMS Ladybird* on the Yangtze River near Wuhu on December 12, he visited Ambassador Craigie and quickly offered an apology and compensation. Craigie wrote that “the foreign minister showed great spiritual courage.”⁵⁹

Making matters worse, the American river gunboat *USS Panay* was sunk by Japanese naval aircraft on the Yangtze River near Nanjing that same day. He immediately went to Ambassador Grew, who was surprised by Hirota’s “heartfelt apology and regret.”⁶⁰ Hirota’s non-evasive approach to the incident was seen as sincere and avoided further deterioration of relations with the United States. He wanted to maintain Japan’s relations with the West despite the increased demands of China.

Hirota reported on the *Ladybird* and *Panay* incidents at the December 14 cabinet meeting. The view of those at the meeting was that “while there remains the possibility that the incidents with the British and American gunboats could become quite serious, the prompt apologies by the foreign and navy ministers do not seem to have left a negative impression.”⁶¹

Hirota was torn between being a rational diplomat and acting as a patriot who had grown up around the Gen’yōsha. In a way, the duality of Hirota and his lack of a diplomatic cornerstone symbolized Japan’s wobbling between China and the West. He attempted to make use of both aspects, but this was a treacherous balance to maintain. Swayed by populist politics and heightened popular expectations, Hirota began to abandon the idea of negotiations with the Chiang Kai-shek regime and became drawn into the army’s scheme of establishing a puppet government.

The Fall of Nanjing and the Four Peace Conditions

Nanjing finally fell on December 13, 1937. Japan erupted into celebration of the “Imperial army’s” victory, and a crowd of 400,000 jubilant people marched through Tokyo at dusk. Illuminated by electric street signs, the march formed a long procession that was led by a brass band. Cheers of “Banzai” echoed through the winter sky. Soon, people holding lanterns gathered outside of the imperial palace, forming a wave of light that colored the sky from the Sakuradamon Gate to Marunouchi. A seemingly endless whirlwind of lantern processions paraded through the streets.⁶²

Many of these people drunk on the thrill of victory likely believed that the war was over. The reality was the opposite. Ending a war is usually more difficult than starting one, and the Second Sino-Japanese War would largely become a quagmire from this point on.

On December 14, the Provisional Government of the Republic of China was established in Beiping. Wang Kemin was named president of its Executive Council, but this was actually a puppet government under the control of Japan’s Northern

China Area Army. According to Kazami, “both Navy Minister Yonai and Foreign Minister Hirota explicitly stated that they first learned of the new government in northern China from the newspapers.”⁶³ That the Nationalist government did not recognize the Provisional Government goes without saying.

That same day, new peace conditions were discussed at a meeting of the Imperial General Headquarters-Government Liaison Conference. This body was intended to coordinate policy between the military and the government. While War Minister Sugiyama called for tougher peace conditions, Hirota remained entirely silent. He did state at the December 16 meeting that the Nationalist government should not be repudiated, however.⁶⁴ His attitude would soon grow harsher.

On December 22, Hirota sent four new peace conditions to von Dirksen: first, China must abandon its pro-communist, anti-Japanese, and anti-Manchukuoan policies and cooperate with Japan and Manchukuo in the defense against communism; second, demilitarized zones and special bodies were to be established where necessary; third, China, Manchukuo, and Japan were to conclude an agreement on economic cooperation; and fourth, China would pay reparations. These are listed in full in Table 6.1. The Konoe government wanted an answer by the end of the year, and Japan would not end its military activities until a treaty was signed, even if negotiations were ongoing. Hirota’s statements were derived from a cabinet decision made the previous day.

When asked by von Dirksen, Hirota specified that the recognition of Manchukuo would be included in the peace treaty and that demilitarized zones for northern China and the Yangtze River basin were envisioned. The peace conditions put forth by Hirota were the sort that would be imposed upon an already defeated enemy. Von Dirksen expressed a reluctance to pass them on, noting that “I don’t see there being any chance that the Chinese government will accept these.” Hirota countered that “given the popular pressure and changes in the military situation, no other terms would be possible.”

As seen in Hirota’s words, the rapid hardening of the Konoe government’s posture was derived from the popular sentiment in Japan following the fall of Nanjing that the war had already been won. The Konoe government lacked a firm support base and so instead pursued populist politics that appealed to public opinion. And by not

Table 6.1 Japan’s four conditions for peace

1	China is to abandon its pro-communist, anti-Japanese, and anti-Manchukuoan policies and cooperate with Japan and Manchukuo in their defense against communism
2	Demilitarized zones are to be created in necessary areas and special bodies are to be established in these areas
3	An agreement on economic cooperation is to be concluded by China, Manchukuo, and Japan
4	China is to pay required reparations to the Empire

Source Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Nihon Gaikō Nenpyō Nami Shuyō Bunsho* [Chronology and Major Papers on Japanese Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1965)

being fully aware of the danger of directly linking diplomacy to fluctuations in public opinion, Hirota himself limited the possibilities for negotiation.⁶⁵

Hirota's True Intentions

The academic consensus is that there are a large number of unknowns concerning Hirota's true intentions toward the peace efforts with China. This is because many official documents from the foreign ministry and military were disposed of following Japan's defeat, making historical analysis difficult. However, in the course of writing this book, I was able to obtain Hirota's diplomatic telegrams related to the efforts. I would like to use these "Beiping Embassy Records" to recreate Hirota's own voice from his telegrams to Counselor Morishima Morito and others in Beiping and thereby explore his true intentions.

As mentioned above, Hirota submitted four peace conditions to von Dirksen on December 22. At first glance, these did not include recognition of Manchukuo, and the specifics of what exactly was involved in the proposed agreement on economic cooperation between China, Manchukuo, and Japan was unclear. However, according to a telegram to Morishima, Hirota provided von Dirksen with a detailed supplementary explanation.

On the first condition, Hirota told von Dirksen that "it naturally includes recognition of Manchukuo," that cooperation in the defense against communism "could mean participation in the Anti-Comintern Pact, or the conclusion of an anti-communist agreement between Japan, Manchukuo, and China," and that "it would be preferable if [the Sino-Soviet non-aggression pact] could be discarded."

On the second condition, he explained that:

The demilitarized zones would be established in areas like northern China, Inner Mongolia, and the Jiangnan region. The special bodies mentioned included an autonomous government in Inner Mongolia; while northern China would not necessarily have an autonomous government, something with wide-ranging authority would be needed to carry out economic cooperation between Japan, Manchukuo, and China. It would be under Chinese sovereignty but not dependent upon the central government.

Asked by von Dirksen whether the "special body in northern China" referred to the Provisional Government, Hirota answered that "it may indeed be that or something like it."

When von Dirksen asked with regards to the third condition whether the economic agreement "meant the resolution of past long-standing issues," Hirota explained that it was "not just the resolution of long-standing issues but also general economic cooperation between Japan, Manchukuo, and China, such as in the development of natural resources, tariffs, trade, flights, traffic, and communications." Japan thus sought to impose far-ranging economic agreements.

Von Dirksen complained that "the conditions demanded by Japan have been made more severe overall," prompting Hirota to ask for his understanding as "it

was unavoidable given changes in the situation.” Even so, von Dirksen explicitly stated that “Chiang should not accept these.” Von Dirksen may have aided Japan’s peace efforts, but Hirota’s demands had clearly become too onerous for him.

Trautmann conveyed the four conditions to the Nationalist government on December 26, and von Dirksen later provided an account of the scene to Hirota. According to a January 8, 1938 telegram from Hirota to Morishima:

Chiang Kai-shek was ill, and as such the four conditions were delivered to Kong Xiangxi and Soong Mei-ling in Hankou on December 26. Both were extremely shocked. [...] Kong Xiangxi seemed at a loss as to whether the Japanese conditions should be rejected out of hand. The Chinese government seems to have still not reached any decision yet.

Hirota was thus aware of Chiang’s illness and that it would likely cause a delay in the Chinese response. He was also concerned about China “engaging in schemes, conveying our conditions to the United States and others to find out their intentions.” Despite knowing that Chiang’s illness meant that China could not respond, Hirota still saw the lack of a Chinese answer as an insincere delaying tactic.⁶⁶

With public opinion surging, the Konoe government was beginning to abandon the idea of negotiating with the Chiang regime, and this was reflected in Hirota’s attitude. On December 24, the cabinet adopted its “Guidelines for Managing the Incident (A).” This document held that Japan would “no longer necessarily expect to reach an agreement with the Nanjing government” and that an anti-communist, pro-Japanese, and pro-Manchukuoan government would be established in northern China. This would in turn grow to become the primary power in the new China. The Konoe government was turning from negotiations to favoring a puppet government.⁶⁷

The Nanjing Massacre—“Criminal Negligence” by Hirota?

During this period, an appalling incident occurred in Japanese-occupied Nanjing: the Nanjing Massacre. Hirota was naturally kept informed on the massacre by foreign ministry personnel stationed in China. Acting Nanjing Consul-General Fukui Kiyoshi had evacuated to Shanghai during the fighting, but the first report he submitted to Tokyo after his return to Nanjing was on the massacre. Shanghai Consul-General Okamoto Suemasa also provided detailed written reports on the massacre. And protests from the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone, a group organized by foreign residents of the city, were also forwarded to Tokyo by the Nanjing consulate. There were a pile of reports and photographs related to the massacre in the East Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section’s office.

After looking through the voluminous materials, East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Ishii provided an overview of the massacre to Hirota. Shocked, Hirota told him that “we need to do something immediately,” and lodged a stiff protest with the War Ministry Military Affairs Bureau through Ishii. Local army forces responded by criticizing the Nanjing consulate, declaring that they would not tolerate the consulate digging into their affairs and reporting on them to the central government. Hirota

requested that War Minister Sugiyama take steps to restore military discipline, but he did not bring up the massacre at the next cabinet meeting.⁶⁸

Why did Hirota fail to reference the Nanjing Massacre at the cabinet meeting? Hidaka Shinrokurō, a counselor at the Japanese embassy in China and a graduate of the Shūyūkan, offered the following defense of his actions:

It has been argued that Foreign Minister Hirota should have brought up the incident at the cabinet meeting. Given the contemporary circumstances, however, that would likely have had the opposite effect. There can be no question that, had the cabinet deliberated on the matter, it would have provoked the army further. It would have claimed that the cabinet meeting was interfering with the supreme command authority of the Emperor. Instead, the foreign ministry demanded an explanation from the war minister and filed a protest with the Military Affairs Bureau. I believe that Hirota took what he believed to be the most effective steps with regards to the Nanjing Incident.

In any case, the consequences of Hirota's failure to raise the matter were great. Most members of the cabinet remained unaware of the massacre, and his lack of actions here would be determined to be "criminal negligence" at the Tokyo Trials after the war.

We do not know what would have happened had Hirota brought up the Nanjing Massacre at the cabinet meeting. While a direct comparison cannot be made, his behavior does call to mind the way that, at a cabinet meeting held in the wake of the Manchurian Incident, Foreign Minister Shidehara insinuated that the incident had been an army plot and put in place a policy of non-expansion.

The massacre continued for a time even after Hirota learned of it and sought to have Sugiyama restore discipline. That Hirota had refrained from bringing the massacre to the cabinet's attention out of consideration for Sugiyama did not stop Sugiyama from complaining to Chief Cabinet Secretary Kazami that "Hirota's indecisiveness is causing problems."⁶⁹

Hirota's request that military discipline be enforced in the army should not be considered entirely meaningless. The army leadership dispatched Maj. Gen. Honma Masaharu, head of the General Staff Office 2nd Bureau, to Nanjing in late January 1938. Gen. Matsui Iwane, commander of the Central China Area Army, would be summoned back to Japan on the basis of Honma's report.

Ending the Trautmann Mediation

As the Nanjing Massacre was ongoing in China, the Army General Staff Office attended an Imperial Conference. The General Staff Office did not hold hardline views; it was actually concerned about the Konoe government's growing inclination to repudiate the Chiang government and that its peace conditions were becoming excessive. This conference, the first of its kind since the Russo-Japanese War, was held on January 11, 1938.

The attendees bowed deeply as the Emperor took his seat. Konoe, who was in charge of the conference, then asked Hirota to make a statement. Hirota explained

the course of the peace process thus far and then argued for “being prepared for both peace and war moving forward.” Should the Nationalist government fail to sue for peace, then Japan would promote the formation of a new government rather than continue to work with it. Army Chief of the General Staff Prince Kan'in Kotohito, Navy Chief of Staff Prince Fushimi Hiroyasu, and President of the Privy Council Hiranuma Kiichirō all supported the government's plan. The conference gave its approval to this “Fundamental Policy for the Management of the China Incident.”

It was decided at an informal cabinet meeting on January 13 that the Trautmann Mediation would be abandoned should the Chinese fail to respond by the 15th. Around this time, Hirota seems to have given up on the idea of a peace with China and become prepared to see through a lengthy war. This stemmed from irritation at the delay in the Chinese response as well as the Konoe government's policy shift away from negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek to fostering a puppet regime.⁷⁰ At this crossroads in the Second Sino-Japanese War, it was the patriot within Hirota who came to the fore, not the rational diplomat.

Discussions again turned to ending the Trautmann Mediation at the cabinet meeting on the 14th. Following the meeting, von Dirksen requested a meeting with Hirota and provided him with the long-awaited Chinese response to the four peace conditions that Japan had put forward. This consisted solely of a request for further details, however. Furious, Hirota declared it to be “lacking all sincerity; it is merely an attempt by the Chinese to delay.”

Hirota believed that the Chinese should have taken the initiative in putting forward their own proposal for peace; for the Nationalist government, aware of the Japanese conditions, to seek more particulars without stating their own views showed a lack of good faith. After reporting on this meeting to the cabinet, Hirota asked it to reaffirm the 15th as the deadline for the Chinese answer.⁷¹ This was a de facto abandonment of the Trautmann Mediation. The cabinet then “utterly rejected Chiang's response that he wanted to know the details of the conditions and decided that a statement would be issued on the 16th.”⁷²

The First Konoe Statement

The Imperial General Headquarters-Government Liaison Conference met on January 15 at the prime minister's residence. The date set as the deadline for the Chinese reply had come, and no formal answer had been received. Japan was now on the brink of abandoning the Trautmann Mediation. And if it did so, that could lead to it also repudiating the Nationalist government.

It was not Hirota or Konoe who urged caution at this conference, but rather Lt. Gen. Tada Hayao, vice chief of the Army General Staff. Tada emphasized that Japan should continue to wait for an answer from China. While Prince Kan'in Kotohito was nominally Tada's superior, Tada's words reflected the views of the General Staff Office. The General Staff Office did not feel that the Konoe government recognized the difficulties that would come from a protracted war.

War Minister Sugiyama countered that “there has been no answer as of the deadline, and there is no evidence of any sincere desire for peace. We should not deal with Chiang Kai-shek. We should continue to carry out operations until he surrenders.” Agreeing with Sugiyama, Hirota adopted a harsh tone:

Speaking from my extensive experience as a diplomat, the back-and-forth approach adopted by the Chinese clearly lacks any sincere desire for a peaceful resolution. Or does the vice chief not trust the foreign minister?

Hirota had finally given up on negotiations with Chiang’s government. Boosted by Hirota’s hardline stance, Konoe stated that “we need to quickly cut off the peace negotiations and make our stance clear.” Navy Minister Yonai firmly added that “the government trusts the foreign minister.” The Konoe government thus rejected the General Staff Office’s call for caution and decided to terminate the negotiations.

Hirota went so far as to assert that “we need to move to the second stage, a long-term war of resistance, and stiffen our resolve to resist China no matter how long it takes.” It was at this moment that any chance of an early peace died. Hirota and Konoe were quite excited and focused on the January 22 reopening of the Diet. And in their haste to make their stance clear before the Diet resumed, they lost their objectivity.⁷³

On January 16, Hirota informed Ambassador von Dirksen that the negotiations with China were being ended. That same day, the Konoe government announced that “Henceforth, we will no longer deal with the Nationalist government. We look forward to the establishment and development of a new Chinese government that is truly capable of partnering with the Empire.”⁷⁴ While this would become popularly known as the “First Konoe Statement,” the text had actually been prepared by the foreign ministry.

According to Tajiri Akiyoshi, first secretary at the Japanese embassy in China, “I learned in later years that this statement had been dictated by the Asian Section director to Nakajima Kazuo. He chose to use the characters for ‘enemy’ rather than the more neutral ‘other party’ to write ‘*aite*.’” The “Asian Section director” referred to was East Asian Affairs Bureau 1st Section Director Kamimura Shin’ichi. Tajiri’s claim is also collaborated by Nakajima’s memoirs.

While Kamimura himself acknowledged verbally giving the statement to Nakajima, he claimed that he was merely going off of the Fundamental Policy for the Management of the China Incident that had been adopted at the Imperial Conference. He also said that the reason he had settled on the phrase “will no longer deal with” (*aite to sezu*) in the statement was because it was ambiguous and allowed some room for interpretation.⁷⁵

Hirota was naturally involved in the drafting of the statement as well. According to Finance Minister Kaya Okinori, while the army had spoken of “the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek” and “annihilation,” Hirota had softened this to “will no longer deal with.”⁷⁶ In any case, the statement was not only a repudiation of the Nationalist government, but also an announcement that Japan would be strengthening its relations with the puppet states that it had created in China.

On January 18, the Konoe government released a supplementary statement clarifying that the language “will no longer deal with” was “stronger than a repudiation” and declaring that Japan “repudiates the Nationalist government and will seek its destruction.” Ambassador to China Kawagoe was recalled to Tokyo that same day, and Chinese Ambassador Xu withdrew on the 20th.⁷⁷ This was the beginning of a long-term war with no clear prospects for Japan.

“Partnering” with Puppet Governments

After the Diet resumed on January 22 following a brief recess, Hirota addressed the House of Peers. Speaking after Konoe, he explained the circumstances behind the First Konoe Statement and revealed the four peace conditions that had been used in the non-public peace efforts.

He testified that China “provided no response displaying any sincerity” and that “they themselves threw away the final opportunity granted by the Imperial government [...] It consequently became evident that there was no hope of resolving the Incident.”

Hirota also forcefully argued that he “looked forward to the establishment and development of a new Chinese government capable of truly cooperating with the Empire” and that “I firmly believe that this is the only path capable of achieving the stability in East Asia that the Empire strives for, one based on a Sino-Japanese partnership.”⁷⁸ He now viewed a puppet government, not the Nationalist government, as Japan’s counterpart in that “partnership.” He delivered a speech in the House of Representatives to the same effect as well.

He had thus made Japan’s peace conditions public and flatly declared that there were no prospects for peace. This speech was widely covered in the press under headlines like “Our Four Demands of China: Defense Against Communism, Demilitarized Zones, Economic Pact, Compensation – Minimum Conditions Clarified in Foreign Minister’s Speech.”⁷⁹ Negotiations had now been abandoned in both word and deed.

But while Hirota also testified that he thought it unlikely that a third party would mediate a peace between Japan and China in the future, he remained wary of formally declaring war on China.⁸⁰ Doing so would introduce too many uncertainties, such as the United States invoking its neutrality laws and restricting trade with Japan.

The January 18 supplementary statement had also specified that, “while this is being circulated as a declaration of war, the Empire does not view the innocent Chinese people with hostility. And given the official stance that we will not deal with the Nationalist government, it would be impossible for us to declare war on it.”⁸¹ As seen from its continued use of the term “the China Incident,” the government maintained the façade that there was no war. The government had this Diet pass not only a massive budget but also the National Mobilization Law and the Electric Power Management Law.

On March 28, as if to back-up Hirota’s speech in which he spoke of “looking forward to the establishment and development of a new Chinese government,” the Reformed Government of the Republic of China was formed in Nanjing. While Liang Hongzhi was its nominal leader as president of the Executive Yuan, this was a puppet state created by the Central China Expeditionary Army. Together with the Provisional Government in Beiping, Japan had now established two puppet regimes, one in the north and one in the south. This naturally drew the condemnation of the Nationalist government.

These puppet governments were established out of a desire to have a new central government in Japanese occupied territory capable of countering the Chiang Kai-shek regime. This would later lead to efforts aimed at Wang Jingwei and the merger of the Provisional and Reformed governments into the Wang regime in Nanjing. But there was no way that a jumble of puppet governments was going to be able to resolve the situation.

With the Second Sino-Japanese War becoming increasingly chaotic, the Konoe government sought to form an “East Asia Office” (Tōa Jimukyoku) or “China Board” (Taishi-in) to serve as a body directly under the prime minister to advance policy toward China. This would ultimately take the form of the East Asia Development Board (Kōain), a cabinet-level agency that was the central organization for China policy, albeit after Hirota was no longer in office.

As such a body represented an infringement of the foreign ministry’s remit, Hirota tried to have it created as an external organ of the ministry with Shiratori Toshio at its head.⁸² Hirota was no longer as enthusiastic about having foreign policy unified under the foreign ministry as he had once been, however, and he was also not entirely unhappy to see responsibility for the management of the Second Sino-Japanese War shifted away to another body.

He complained to Foreign Ministry Research Department Director Yonezawa Kikuji that “it was likely inevitable that some other body would take over responsibility for managing the Incident. That was the approach favored by Prime Minister Konoe, so it would have been extremely difficult for me to successfully oppose it all on my own.” He realized that, with the increasing amount of territory being occupied by the Japanese army, the scope of his responsibilities as foreign minister was being reduced.⁸³

By late May, he was even telling Konoe that “it seems that nothing is going well now diplomatically. If you decide to reorganize [your cabinet], I would like to step down.” He also stated that “foreign policy is quite difficult. It’s not as simple as everyone thinks.” Hirota had become largely resigned toward not influencing management of the war.⁸⁴

All remaining personnel were withdrawn from the Chinese embassy in Japan in June, ending any possibility of diplomatic talks with Chiang’s government. Even the Konoe government had had to acknowledge by this point that the First Konoe Statement had been a misstep. And in order for the government to de facto retract that statement and try to revive peace efforts with China, it would need a new foreign minister. Hirota’s diplomatic approach had ultimately resulted in failure.

Hirota's Poor Reputation

Hirota was thus struggling to find a way forward as the war with China became a quagmire. And Konoe himself, having realized that the First Konoe Statement had been a mistake, repeatedly spoke of stepping down. But after Hirota persuaded him to stay on, he turned to reorganizing his cabinet instead. As the purpose of this cabinet reshuffle was to move away from the First Konoe Statement, the removal of Hirota and Sugiyama had to take center stage. Abandoning Hirota, who was not attempting to restrain the army in the least, Konoe appointed Ugaki Kazushige as foreign minister. Having already requested to step down earlier, Hirota readily resigned on May 26.⁸⁵

Ugaki had heard of “Hirota’s idleness and apathy” from East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Ishii and Information Department Director Kawai. Unaware of this, Hirota met with Ugaki on May 17. Ugaki offered his advice on how to publicize the Battle of Xuzhou, but Hirota only “chuckled, displaying an implicit lack of desire to do anything.” Ugaki had a very low opinion of him.⁸⁶

Criticism of Hirota was not limited to Ugaki. The Emperor was also disappointed in him. This became known nearly fifty years later in 1986, when the Emperor read a work by the political scientist Inoki Masamichi.

Inoki’s book was on the decision-making of politicians, and in it he mercilessly criticized Hirota:

It was shockingly irresponsible and lacking in principle for [Hirota] to put forward peace conditions to the German ambassador and seek his intercession for peace, only to then take the lead in making those conditions harsher at the cabinet meeting held following the capture of Nanjing. While Hirota’s good points are emphasized in Shiroyama Saburō’s *The Setting Sun Burns*, I believe that he had lost his decisiveness by early 1936.⁸⁷

The Emperor evidently agreed with Inoki’s cold appraisal of Hirota. Sending a message through the Imperial Household Agency, he told Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro that “Inoki’s book is extremely accurate, particularly with regards to Konoe and Hirota.”⁸⁸ It seems likely that this message was intended to reinforce the proper nature of political leadership to Nakasone.

Political leadership cannot be swayed by fleeting contemporary trends, particularly in a crisis. When a leader stands at a crossroads for their nation, they need to exercise responsible decisiveness and view things from a broader perspective than merely conforming to the majority. The Emperor, in his final years, may have wanted to bequeath this message to future generations and those in power at the time. It was a historical lesson that he had learned from his personal experience of Japan’s defeat.

Diplomacy and Populism

The problem that faced Hirota as he served as foreign minister in the Konoe government—how to respond to the Second Sino-Japanese War—was the most difficult of his life, and he would not be able to benefit from this guidance from the Emperor. It was under the Konoe government that the war became a quagmire.

When the future becomes uncertain, people are prone to pinning their hopes on a charismatic leader and to pursuing national prestige through military action. The leaders thus elevated by the public, lacking a sense of responsibility and a stable political base, tend to cater to the masses. But even if a government is successful in holding on to power through hardline measures, it will only be temporary. Eventually the debt thereby incurred will weigh heavily; not just on the government but on the people as well.

Konoe was just such a leader. He was prone to relying upon his popularity and, having stirred up enthusiastic popular support through appealing to public opinion, found himself unable to maintain control over the course of the Second Sino-Japanese War. As an experienced diplomat, it would have been Hirota's place to help keep the much younger Konoe in check. Instead, Hirota—who almost had the status of a deputy prime minister—repeatedly gave passive approval as the Konoe government effectively denied the local ceasefire reached in the wake of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, deciding to send additional forces to China and arranging funding.

He lacked the will to resist the military and failed to maintain a distance from Konoe's populist methods. The lower-ranking members of the foreign ministry leadership did realize the dangers of Konoe-style populism, but Hirota did not heed their views.

Hirota displayed relative enthusiasm for the peace effort pursued through Germany. But when the Japanese army advanced on Nanjing, he took the lead in seeking harsher terms, even before the army did so. Catering to the public's sense of victory, the government ended the Trautmann Mediation and repudiated the Nationalist government in the First Konoe Statement. Hirota failed to ever bring the Nanjing Massacre to the attention of the cabinet and then departed the government before Konoe.

This course of events cannot be explained solely as Hirota having been steamrolled by the military; his submission to public opinion played a major role. And the state of that opinion was in no small part the result of the Konoe government's actions. The more volatile the situation, the more the public tends to be swayed by emotion rather than the long-term outlook. It is particularly in such times that diplomatic leaders must bravely maintain a separation between populism and popular opinion. But there is no sense of such strong will in Hirota's foreign policy. Instead, that foreign policy has to be considered one of the reasons that the Second Sino-Japanese War became a protracted conflict.

Source Acronyms

MOFA Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo

NDL National Diet Library Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room

Notes

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6. Morishima Morito, *Inbō Ansatsu Guntō* [Conspiracy, Assassination, and the Sword] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1950), 123.
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8. Sumida Jun, ed., *Ugaki Kazushige Nikki* [The Diary of Ugaki Kazushige] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 1970), 1150.
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22. Harada 6:46, 48.
23. Murakami, *Hametsu e no Michi*, 71–73; Ishii, *Gaikōkan no Isshō*, 300–01; Ishii, *Nikki*, 169.
24. Awaya 28:471. See also: Hata 290.
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27. Kazami Akira, *Konoe Naikaku* [The Konoe Government] (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1982), 69–70. See also: Kitakawa 26–27; Harada 6:33, 43, 61.
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35. “Shina Jihen Zengo Sochi (Wahei Kōshō o Fukumu)” [China Incident Remedial Actions (Including Peace Negotiations)] (A.1.1.0.30-43, MOFA).
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38. *Ibid.*; “Shina Jihen Kankei Ikken” [Matters Pertaining to the China Incident] Vol. 13 (A.1.1.0.30, MOFA); Harada 6:69–70; Ishii, *Gaikōkan no Isshō*, 307–13; Ishii, *Nikki*, 178–79.
39. “Shina Jihen Kankei Ikken” Vol. 23.
40. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1.
41. Kazami 42–47. See also: Kitakawa, Aizawa Kiyoshi, *Kaigun no Sentaku – Saikō Shinjuwan e no Michi* [The Navy’s Choice: Reconsidering the Road to Pearl Harbor] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2002), 105–10.

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52. “Hokuhei Taishikan Kiroku” [Records of the Beiping Embassy]. See also: *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, Series D, 1:787–89, 799.
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57. *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (December 11, 1937 Evening).
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60. Grew Diary (December 13, 1937), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
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Chapter 7

The Collapse of Imperial Japan—Senior Statesman



Abstract The seventh chapter is devoted to the period from Hirota's resignation as foreign minister in 1938 to the end of the Second World War in 1945. While Hirota did not hold any formal office in the government during this time, he participated in the conferences of senior statesmen who chose new prime ministers due to his status of a former prime minister. Much of the chapter is thus spent on Hirota's views of political and diplomatic developments, particularly his opposition to the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact and his acceptance of the Japanese decision to go to war against the United States. He continued to be in contact with prominent government and diplomatic officials, but Hirota's most significant contribution during this period was his heavy involvement in the doomed diplomatic overtures toward the Soviet Union in the final months of the war to have it either mediate an end to the war or at least remain neutral. These are covered in detail and illustrate the dysfunctional state of the foreign ministry in responding to Japan's worsening military situation.

From the Konoe to the Hiranuma Governments

On May 26, 1938, Ugaki Kazushige was appointed foreign minister in Konoe's new cabinet. In a rejection of his predecessor Hirota's policies and a *de facto* retraction of the First Konoe Statement, Ugaki attempted to make peace with the Nationalist government. Responsibility for the previous policy was pushed onto Hirota. Sugiyama was also replaced as war minister by Lt. Gen. Itagaki Seishirō, who was believed to belong to the non-expansionist faction of the army.

Now that he was no longer foreign minister, the only position Hirota held was that of member of the House of Peers. While he had received an imperial appointment in May 1937, he had not done anything of significance there or joined any of the body's factions.

Harada Kumao visited Hirota's home in Harajuku after his resignation. Speaking on the role that Ugaki had to play, Hirota stressed to Harada that "the most important thing—whether we're talking about China or anything else—is securing the trust of America and Britain." He also said that "I may have stepped down, but we are in a

critical situation. I intend to pay close attention to and carefully study any changes in that situation.”¹ Hirota may no longer have had an active role, but he was still keeping an eye on Ugaki’s diplomatic efforts.

Ugaki would himself step down as foreign minister only four months later, however, without having produced any results in his peace efforts toward China. Arita Hachirō, who had previously served as foreign minister in the Hirota government, resumed that position in October.

While the Japanese military captured Guangdong and Wuhan, military operations were reaching a stalemate. In November, the Konoe government announced that it hoped that China would “share in the task of constructing a new order in East Asia” and brought KMT Vice President Wang Jingwei to Hanoi in French Indochina.² Wang had called on Chiang Kai-shek to make peace with Japan, but this had been ignored by the Nationalist government.

In January 1939, the Konoe government resigned, and a new government was formed under President of the Privy Council Hiranuma Kiichirō, who had a justice ministry background. Arita, Itagaki, and Yonai remained on in the new government in their respective positions of foreign, war, and navy minister. The bombing of Chongqing was carried out under the Hiranuma government, and Hainan Island and Nanchang were captured. The Kwantung Army and Soviet military also clashed near the Mongolian-Manchukuoan border in May, resulting in a Japanese defeat at the Battles of Khalkhin Gol. In June, the Japanese military also blockaded the British and French concessions in Tianjin (the Tientsin incident) in the name of stemming the activities of “anti-Japanese elements.”

Despite the war bogging down, Hirota seemed to have a somewhat optimistic view of the military situation and was surprisingly concerned about the postwar yen exchange rate. He argued to Harada that “it is also extremely important that Japan devise countermeasures for a potential fall in the value of the yen—in its exchange rate—following the end of the war or find a way to prevent such a fall.”³

From the Abe to the Yonai Governments

The Hiranuma government resigned in the wake of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, with Hiranuma declaring that “the situation in Europe is complicated and bizarre.” With rebuilding Japanese diplomacy becoming a pressing matter, Hirota’s name rapidly surfaced as a potential candidate for prime minister.

Among Hirota’s backers for the position was Konoe, the man who had abandoned him a year earlier. He told Home Minister Kido Kōichi that “while I believe that having Araki [Sadao] lead the next government would work out, wouldn’t Hirota be a better choice? I saw him the other day, and his views are quite close to those of the army.” After surveying the views of figures including Konoe and Imperial Household Minister Yuasa Kurahei, Harada reported to Saionji Kinmochi that Hirota was the

leading candidate, followed by Ugaki Kazushige. But the elderly Saionji demurred, stating that “I have no idea what to do about the next government.”

When Harada visited Hirota in Kugenuma, Hirota earnestly told him that “Prince Konoe is by far the best suited to head the next government. And should he take on that role, I would be willing to take over foreign policy, as incapable as I am.” Harada “felt that this was an utterly terrible [idea], something I could put no trust in.” With both Hirota and Konoe recommending the other for the position, Saionji was unable to make a decision. Despite the crisis, there seemed to be no one of the necessary caliber to be prime minister. It was ultimately decided neither Hirota nor Konoe but Gen. Abe Nobuyuki would be the next premier.⁴

When the Second World War began in September, the Abe government decided to remain uninvolved, and Nomura Kichisaburō, the new foreign minister, worked to improve relations with America and Britain. But the government stumbled in its attempts to create a new ministry for trade and to abolish the permanent employment system for civil servants. The Minseitō and Seiyūkai submitted a motion of no confidence, and the government resigned after only four and a half months in office.

A new government was formed under Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa on January 16, 1940, and Arita returned to the position of foreign minister for the third time. Hirota visited an ill Saionji at his villa in Okitsu on January 27 and asked Harada, “incapable as I am, is there any way that I could be of service in this serious situation?”

In February, Hirota hesitantly became a councilor (*sangi*) in the Yonai government so as to apply his experience to the political situation. Councilors were a new position created during the Konoe government that served as advisors to the prime minister. Yonai had served alongside Hirota in Konoe’s cabinet as navy minister; now that he was prime minister, he very much wanted Hirota as a councilor working alongside Arita.⁵

Hirota assisted the Yonai government, providing advice to Arita. “All the bureaus involved in foreign affairs were in agreement that Japan should take the outbreak of the European war as an opportunity to protect its neutrality and rapidly make peace with China”; Hirota agreed and “supported them” in this effort.⁶

After Wang Jingwei’s Reorganized National Government of the Republic of China was formed in Nanjing on March 30, Japan established an embassy there. Japan’s first ambassador to the new government needed to be a significant name, and both Hirota and former prime minister Abe Nobuyuki’s names were raised as possibilities. Arita favored Hirota, but when the two met to discuss it, Hirota firmly stated that “it would be better in this case to have the ambassador be a military figure.” As such, Abe was chosen to be sent to Nanjing. The overly cautious Hirota was not able to play the role that Arita had hoped he would.⁷

During this period, the seemingly unstoppable German military was advancing through Europe and had forced France to surrender in June. While there was growing sentiment within the Japanese army that Japan should enter into a military alliance with Germany, the Yonai government was unenthusiastic about the idea. After War Minister Hata Shunroku resigned over this disagreement, the army refused to provide a successor, causing the Yonai government to fall in July. This was another example of the army’s usage of the active-duty officer requirement reinstated during the

Hirota government. After the Yonai government resigned and Hirota stepped down as councilor, the 2nd Konoe government was formed.

Criticism of the Tripartite Pact During the 2nd Konoe Government

Rather than the elderly and frequently ill Saionji, it was a conference of senior statesmen who decided on July 17 that Konoe should succeed Yonai as prime minister. This conference was composed of the former prime ministers Hirota, Wakatsuki, Okada, Hayashi, Konoe, and Hiranuma, President of the Privy Council Hara Yoshimichi, and Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido Kōichi.

When Wakatsuki asked Konoe to take the position, there were no objections from the conference. Hirota stated that “I believe that it would best at this point to have someone with an understanding of the military, who is close to the military, [as prime minister]. A military figure would therefore be preferable, but in the absence of an appropriate individual of that kind, Konoe is, naturally, the only choice.” He thus ultimately gave his approval to Konoe, and the 2nd Konoe government was thus born.⁸

Following the conference, Hirota advised Konoe to appoint Tōgō Shigenori rather than Matsuoka Yōsuke as his foreign minister. Matsuoka had left the foreign ministry in 1922 and served as a Diet member for the Seiyūkai and as president of the South Manchuria Railway after that time. By comparison, Tōgō was a career diplomat who had been ambassador to the Soviet Union for two years and previously served as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau and as ambassador to Germany. Hirota trusted his former subordinate whose career path was similar to his own.

When Konoe responded that “Many people are telling me to appoint Matsuoka Yōsuke,” Hirota declared that “Matsuoka is a dangerous choice. You should appoint Tōgō.” Konoe had always preferred unconventional appointments, however, and chose Matsuoka anyway. He was also familiar with Matsuoka as Matsuoka has served as a councilor in his first government.⁹ Tōjō Hideki joined the cabinet as war minister.

On September 27, Foreign Minister Matsuoka concluded the Tripartite Pact with German and Italy, ignoring Hirota’s uneasiness about the alliance. Afterwards, Konoe summoned the senior statesmen and reported on the development alongside Matsuoka and Tōjō. Furious, Hirota gave a rare display of anger:

It is beyond my understanding what makes this treaty necessary. What Japan needs most right now in its foreign policy is to bring a conclusion to the China Incident. And yet, by concluding this treaty, we have made American and Britain our outright enemies. Chiang Kai-shek will naturally do all he can to use this to bring those countries onto the side of the Chinese. This will make a resolution to the China Incident all the more difficult.

Taken aback by the forcefulness of Hirota’s statement, Matsuoka was only able to respond with a vague reply that “our views differ.” Hirota continued:

Britain and America have thus far supplied goods fairly to both China and Japan. Where will we get those supplies now that we've made them into our enemies?

No one wanted to answer this question. Eventually, Hoshino Naoki, head of the Cabinet Planning Board (Kikaku-in) said that "As American and Britain are both liberal democracies, we'll likely be able to make some kind of private arrangements even if their governments are opposed." Hirota "did not reply, considering the assertion unworthy of rebuttal."

While it would have been typical of Hirota to end things there, on this day he went further:

You claim that this treaty will allow us to maintain the status quo with the Soviet Union, but I find that unlikely. The Soviets will be in between Germany and Japan [geographically]. That means that we will need to bring the Soviets over to our side if Japan and Germany are to cooperate. America and Britain will attempt to do the same, leading to a contest over the Soviet Union. We will not be able to just maintain the status quo as you've suggested.¹⁰

While Hirota had been prime minister when the Anti-Comintern Pact had been signed, he had been worried that it might ultimately lead to a military alliance with Germany. By signing the Tripartite Pact, Foreign Minister Matsuoka had now turned those fears into a reality. There was talk around this time of sending Hirota to the United States as a special envoy to help ease tensions between the two countries, but this did not amount to anything.¹¹

On October 12, all political parties were dissolved and the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (IRAA) was formed. This was a government-run national unity organization with branches at the local level and Prime Minister Konoe as its president. Hirota had never belonged to any of the House of Peers' factions, but on April 30, 1941, he was a founding member of the Independent Club (Mushozoku Kurabu). This faction supported the government in the war effort and its attempts to boost public opinion.

The organizers of the Independent Club were former Cabinet Planning Board president Taki Masao and former justice minister Koyama Matsukichi. In addition to Hirota, the faction's twenty-three members included Matsumoto Jōji, commerce minister in the Saitō government, Gotō Fumio, home minister in the Okada government, Hirao Hachisaburō, education minister in the Hirota government, and Yoshino Shinji, industrial minister in the 1st Konoe government. Gotō was also vice-president of the IRAA.¹²

The 3rd Konoe Government and the Senior Statesmen Conference

Foreign Minister Matsuoka returned to Japan in triumph after signing the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact in Moscow on April 13, 1941. Unbeknownst to Matsuoka, however, Germany had been preparing for war against the Soviet Union and launched

an invasion of the country on June 22. With a rift growing between Matsuoka and Konoe over negotiations with the United States, the 2nd Konoe government resigned on July 16.

A senior statesmen conference was held the following day, and President of the Privy Council Hara as well as former prime ministers Abe, Okada, Hayashi, and Yonai felt that Konoe should again be given the mandate to form a government. Despite this wide support for Konoe, Hirota again “argued forcefully for a military cabinet and strengthening Imperial General Headquarters.”

The difficulties he had experienced as foreign minister in the 1st Konoe government seem to have made Hirota concerned that Konoe would not be able to overcome the harsh situation facing Japan. But he was ultimately persuaded by Kido and the others to support the reappointment of Konoe. Wakatsuki then also agreed to Konoe, albeit unenthusiastically. Thus, the 3rd Konoe government was born.¹³

The Konoe government continued its negotiations with the United States. But the Roosevelt administration froze Japanese assets in the United States and placed a total prohibition on oil exports to Japan after the Japanese military invaded southern French Indochina. On September 6, the Outline for the Execution of Imperial National Policy (Teikoku Kokusaku Suikō Yōryō) was adopted at an Imperial Conference. While the government continued to pursue diplomatic negotiations, it simultaneously carried out preparations for war against America, Britain, and the Netherlands with a target of late October. When the Konoe government resigned on October 16, the US-Japan negotiations were deadlocked.

Another senior statesmen conference was held at the imperial palace on October 17. Hirota, Kiyoura Keigo, Wakatsuki, Okada, Hayashi, Abe, and Yonai attended as former prime ministers, and Kido and Hara were present as well. The atmosphere at the conference was unusual, with the ninety-one-year-old Kiyoura present.

Wakatsuki nominated Ugaki Kazushige to be prime minister, while Hayashi wanted someone from the imperial family. Kido countered that:

What is most needed now is to pursue unity between the army and navy and to reexamine the decisions made at the September 6 Imperial Conference. It is for that reason that I call for War Minister Tōjō to receive the mandate.

Kido not only wanted Tōjō Hideki, war minister under Konoe, to be prime minister, he also believed that he should continue to hold the position of war minister while doing so. According to his diary, “No one argued against this; Hirota, Abe, and Hara agreed with me.” Having previously argued for a “military cabinet” in July, Hirota had no issue with the mandate going to Tōjō.¹⁴

The Tōjō Government and US-Japan Negotiations

When the Tōjō government was formed on October 18, Tōgō Shigenori was appointed as foreign minister. Tōgō had been a trusted subordinate of Hirota’s since his time as director of the European and American Affairs Bureau, and both men

had followed similar career paths, moving from being director of that bureau to ambassador to the Soviet Union to foreign minister. But while US-Japan negotiations resumed under Tōgō, they continued to make little progress, and war looked increasingly likely.

Concerned, Tōgō visited Hirota on November 2 for advice:

The United States is being unexpectedly unyielding, and there is a serious danger of war. I am disappointed by the unanticipated nature of the situation, and I would prefer to resign, if doing so could improve things in some way.

When he asked Hirota if there was some way of making things better, Hirota chided him:

It is clear that if you resigned, someone in favor of war would immediately be appointed as foreign minister. You should thus remain where you are and do all you can to bring about a successful conclusion to the negotiations.¹⁵

Encouraged by Hirota, Tōgō decided to remain as foreign minister. Hirota's argument certainly seems to have been correct, and Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Nishi Haruhiko shared Hirota's belief.¹⁶

Despite Japan being on the brink of war, Hirota seems to have been optimistic that this would be avoided, even going so far as to tell Diet Member Hatoyama Ichirō on November 17 that "I do not believe war to be inevitable; it is not a given that the negotiations with America will fail."¹⁷

But if those negotiations failed to reach a compromise, the likelihood was that the Tōjō government would choose to go to war. Making matters worse, on November 26 US Secretary of State Cordell Hull presented Japan with the "Hull Note" during the final stage of negotiations. As this document demanded a full withdrawal of Japanese forces from China and French Indochina, Tōjō and others regarded it as an ultimatum.

There was one figure who criticized Hirota's optimism and even sought to have Tōgō resign: Yoshida Shigeru. He had returned to Japan from serving as ambassador to Britain in November 1938 and left government service in the following March.

After showing the Hull Note to Shidehara, Yoshida visited Tōgō and told him bluntly that he should resign:

Your resignation would not only bring cabinet meetings to a halt, it would make even the reckless military reconsider their actions to some extent. Isn't it every man's ambition (*danshi no honkai*) to die such a death?¹⁸

By inducing Tōgō to resign, Yoshida was attempting to strike a blow against the Tōjō government and prevent war with the United States. It was an unconventional approach, as was typical of Yoshida, but he believed it to be the only effective move left to him with war on the horizon. Tōgō, however, would follow Hirota's advice and remain on as foreign minister even after the Pacific War broke out.

What would have happened if Hirota had allowed Tōgō to resign as he had been already inclined to do? It seems possible that the Japanese political situation would still have been mired in chaos when the Soviet-German war turned against Germany.

Japan's war against America was based on the presumption of a German victory in the Second World War. There would have been no reason to rush into hostilities if that presumption was destroyed. Tōgō would later worry about his decision to follow Hirota's advice here.¹⁹

War with the United States

But what stance did Hirota take toward the Pacific War? I would like to examine the events leading to the opening of hostilities in order to explore this point.

A senior statesmen conference was held on the morning of November 29, 1941 at the imperial palace. This was attended by important members of the cabinet including Prime Minister Tōjō and Foreign Minister Tōgō, previous prime ministers Hirota, Abe, Hayashi, Okada, Wakatsuki, Hiranuma, and Konoe, and President of the Privy Council Hara. Tōjō opened the conference by explaining “the reasons that we must go to war,” and Tōgō went over the course of the US-Japan negotiations. While Hirota and Wakatsuki asked Tōgō for further details, no one at the conference recommended accepting the Hull Note.

In the afternoon, the Emperor asked the attendees to give their opinions. When Konoe suggested that Japan could “patiently and prudently observe the situation for a little longer,” Tōjō countered that “I have looked into this matter enough to give myself a headache, and I have arrived at the conclusion that there is no way forward other than to fight.”²⁰

Those like Konoe who supported maintaining the status quo – not going to war, in other words – were by no means the minority. In fact, two-thirds of the attendees favored that course, with Okada and Wakatsuki serving as the core of this group. Only a third agreed with Tōjō that war with the United States was inevitable: Abe and Hayashi (both retired generals), and Hirota. A contemporary army documents states that “Abe, Hayashi, and Hirota seemed to understand the prime minister's determination.”²¹

Caution should be taken in determining Hirota's views, however, as there are differences within the historical record. According to Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido's diary, Hirota said the following in the Emperor's presence:

Rushing headlong into war when faced with a crisis is not the answer. One should always use the utmost care in searching for opportunities to resolve things through diplomatic negotiations, even if [war] seems impossible to avoid, and even if blows have already been exchanged.²²

But while he may have continued to preach caution, it seems likely that Hirota expected Japan to go to war and had decided to pursue a rapid peace rather than strongly oppose the beginning of hostilities. He may have felt that, so long as the Tōjō government regarded the Hull Note as an ultimatum, hostilities were inevitable. And while he certainly was not enthusiastic about the war, the army still saw him as having accepted Tōjō's decision.

The Emperor later gave an unfavorable appraisal of Hirota's participation at the conference, noting that he had "voiced an opinion completely unexpected from someone with a diplomatic background."²³

On December 8, Japan began the Pacific War.

Deteriorating Military Situation

On December 21, Japan signed an alliance with Thailand in Bangkok. The following month, Thailand declared war on Britain and the United States, and Hirota was dispatched to the country as a special envoy to offer congratulations on the alliance.

With reporters flocking to Hirota's residence in Harajuku for the first time in years, he met them in traditional dress and spoke of his aspirations toward Japan's new ally:

Our country's relations with the nations of East Asia have deepened remarkably since I became foreign minister in 1933, especially those with Thailand [...] There are those in southern areas of Thailand who can easily listen to false Anglo-American propaganda and may therefore question the strength of Japan. I want to fully inform them of what the true state of the world is.²⁴

Hirota stopped by his hometown of Fukuoka in July 1942 while on his way to Thailand. While there, he wrote a statement of intent in Chinese calligraphy that was derived from the "Zhi Lu" chapter of *The Analects*: "one who maintains a sense of humility and can carry out a mission a thousand miles away without bringing disgrace to one's lord." In the original book, this is part of a description of the ideal scholar-official. Having visited Thailand, Hirota would later carry out various duties related to the country, including attending the farewell party when the Thai ambassador to Japan returned home.²⁵

The Japanese military was not able to maintain its offensive for long, and the Ministry of Greater East Asia was created in November 1942 to help bring about the completion of the war. This ministry was intended to have jurisdiction over all of the political affairs of the "Greater East Asian Co-Prospersity Sphere," but it also represented a significant weakening of the foreign ministry's authority as it absorbed that ministry's East Asian Affairs and South Seas Affairs bureaus.

Tajiri Akiyoshi pushed back against the move:

I was director of the Information Department at the time of the Ministry of Greater East Asia's creation, and I called together all of my seniors from the ministry to request that they help me stop it. They all agreed, with the exception of Foreign Minister Hirota, the former prime minister, who told me that it was futile. He acted indifferent and told me that it was too late.

Hirota had not been deeply attached to the idea of all foreign policy being unified within the foreign ministry since his first term as minister, and Tajiri, aware of this, had no real expectations that he would help.²⁶

During the war, Hirota attended gatherings of senior statesmen and cabinet officers and received information on the diplomatic and military situations directly from Tōjō

and Tōgō. He was particularly focused on Soviet-Japanese relations. This is because, while Japan was otherwise nearly entirely surrounded by enemies, it was not at war with the USSR and the Soviet-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact was still in effect. Hirota believed at this time that Japan should “create a demilitarized zone between Russia and the Japanese military and then withdraw our forces from that area and transfer them to the China theater.”²⁷

When the Tōjō government was reorganized on April 20, 1943, Shigemitsu Mamoru became foreign minister. With the military situation deteriorating, Shigemitsu also intended to find a way out of Japan’s perilous situation by focusing on relations with the Soviets.²⁸

Shigemitsu visited Hirota in September to request his “assistance in resolving relations with the Soviets.” He wanted Hirota to serve as a special envoy to the USSR, but Hirota answered that “I would not be a good choice; you should appoint Tōgō instead.”²⁹ When Ambassador to the Soviet Union Satō Naotake approached People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Molotov about receiving such an envoy, however, he rejected the idea.³⁰

Despite this refusal, Hirota maintained a small amount of hope toward the Soviet Union. On October 13, he spoke with Ōkura Kinmochi, a member of the House of Peers with whom he had been friends since high school, about the prospects for the war:

Everything in Japan is centered around the army: the army first assesses the conduct of the war, and diplomacy follows accordingly. Japan should cooperate with the Soviet Union as much as possible and conclude a peace with China (Chiang Kai-shek) first. If China refuses, Japan should consider carrying out a major punitive campaign against them.³¹

During this time, Hirota viewed cooperation with the Soviets as the cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy and attempted to approach relations with China through that lens. In any case, the Soviet Union was the only remaining foreign country that Japan could potentially rely upon. And his expertise on the Soviets led Hirota to place greater hope in them than most.

Even with the military situation going poorly, Hirota did not forget the students at the Kōkōkyō. He summoned them to his home in Harajuku and gave them a large quantity of rationed foods like sweet potatoes, telling them that “I imagine it must be very hard to be a student right now. I was fortunate enough to come across this food, [so please take it].”

Hirota also privately expressed his anger toward the Tōjō government on this occasion. According to one student, Hirota, “seemingly overcome with patriotic fervor, criticized the tyranny of the military and the ineffective policies of the Tōjō government that he had been unable to stand up to. He declared that the war could not be won and must be ended as soon as possible. He seemed to be working tirelessly, day and night, on strategies to that end.”³²

The Koiso Government and an Envoy to the Soviets

After the fall of Saipan in July 1944, Prime Minister Tōjō sought to add former prime ministers to his cabinet in an attempt to survive the political fallout. But when a senior statesmen conference was held at Hiranuma's home on July 17, both Hirota and Yonai explicitly stated that they would not join his government.

The Tōjō government thus had no choice but to resign the next day. Hirota had previously favored having military figures as prime minister, but when the senior statesmen conference to determine Tōjō's successor was held the following day, he instead proposed choosing a member of the imperial family, saying that "it is essential at this time to create a true national unity government by placing the imperial family at the center." No one else agreed with him, however, and Wakatsuki immediately objected that "we cannot permit political responsibility to be assigned to the imperial family." Gen. Koiso Kuniaki, the governor-general of Korea, was chosen instead.³³

Ugaki had aspirations to become prime minister at this time and had intended to appoint Hirota as foreign minister if he were chosen, but this did not come to pass.³⁴

Shigemitsu remained foreign minister when the Koiso government was formed on July 22. A new body, the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War, was also created the following month to provide unified leadership over the war. This consisted of the prime minister, foreign minister, war minister, navy minister, and the army and navy chiefs of staff. This replaced the previous Imperial General Headquarters-Government Liaison Conference.

At the September 4 meeting of the Supreme Council, it was decided to send Hirota to the Soviet Union as a special envoy to help strengthen relations between the two countries. The neutrality pact was still in effect.³⁵ Once Hirota agreed to go, Shigemitsu directed Ambassador Satō Naotake to convince the Soviets to accept him as envoy. He commented that a figure like Hirota who was "enthusiastic about improving relations with the Soviet Union [was] extremely suitable" for the position.³⁶

Satō met with Molotov on September 16 to discuss Hirota, but the proposal was politely rejected. Envoy to the Soviet Union Morishima Gorō had briefly returned to Japan at this time, and Hirota told him concerning being a special envoy that "we don't need to wait for them to give definitive agreement." The Soviets were, of course, aware of the desperate position that Japan found itself in, and it seems unlikely that, even had Hirota been sent to Moscow, this would have achieved any diplomatic results.³⁷

* * *

That same month, Shintō Kazuma became president of the Gen'yōsha. Hirota had backed him for the position alongside Tōyama Mitsuru, and Ogata Taketora. As Shintō later recalled, "It was at the recommendation of my great seniors Hirota Kōki, Shindō Shintarō, Ogata Taketora, and Yasukawa Daigorō, and with the permission of Tōyama Mitsuru, that I became the tenth president of the Gen'yōsha."³⁸

Kazuma's father Shintō Kiheita had been the fifth president of the organization and had passed away in 1925. Hirota had met with Kiheita prior to traveling to Tokyo and taking the entrance examination for the First High School, and he had been the one to introduce Hirota to Tōyama.

Kazuma's appointment was held in grand fashion in Akasaka, with Shindō, Ogata, and Hirota acting as the hosts. There were more than three hundred attendees, and leading members of the group came all the way from Fukuoka and Korea. Hirota and the others dined on thick steaks and pure white bread, both of which had become scarce.³⁹

Tōyama Mitsuru, one of the founders of the Gen'yōsha, died the following month, and Hirota served as the chairman for his funeral. He stated in the introduction to a biography of Tōyama that "as one of his students, my only regret is that he will be unable to witness the joy of the various nations and peoples of East Asia upon the victorious conclusion of the Greater East Asian War, as that was the great ideal he strived for."⁴⁰

Hirota had thus lost one of his long-standing protectors. Nearly fifty years had passed since their first meeting when Hirota initially traveled from Fukuoka to Tokyo. It had been Tōyama who had introduced Hirota to Yamaza Enjirō and Sugiyama Shigemaru, both of whom had long since passed away. Although Tōyama had died at the elderly age of eighty-nine, Hirota must have been filled with deep emotion by his passing.

Audience with the Emperor

On February 9, 1945, Hirota had an audience with the Emperor in his capacity as a senior statesman. During the meeting, he stated:

I believe the military situation is gradually approaching its conclusion [...] It is particularly important that we take care with regards to Russia given that they are not at war with Japan.

He believed that Japan should be proactive in calling for the continuation of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact and stated that he was willing to personally carry out the negotiations with the Soviets. Hirota had analyzed Stalin's speeches from the previous year, and he felt that the USSR was hardening its stance toward Japan so as to maintain its partnership with America and Britain:

There are those observers who believe that the neutrality pact will continue as at present, but there is no guarantee that the Soviet Union will not take steps to its own advantage.

The Emperor agreed with each of Hirota's statements. The leaves had fallen off the trees outside, and on the winter evening on which the two met, the palace was surrounded by a deep silence that was fortunately not interrupted by any air raid sirens. The palace had escaped significant damage in the repeated bombings of the area. Hirota continued in an even tone of voice:

I believe that, in bringing an end to this war, it is absolutely necessary that we be more active in negotiating with the Soviet Union and take steps to maintain [the current state of] our diplomatic relations.

The Emperor then looked directly at Hirota and asked, “What diplomatic steps should be taken given the situation?”

Keeping his eyes fixed on the small desk in front of the Emperor, Hirota had the following exchange with him:

Hirota: With regards to China, Chiang Kai-shek is in a situation where he is trapped no matter what he tries.

Emperor: How should the negotiations with the Soviets proceed?

Hirota: If the Soviets are opposed to receiving a new envoy from Japan, then I believe that replacing the ambassador would also be an acceptable way of moving things forward.

Having thus gone so far as to suggest that Ambassador Satō be removed, Hirota emphatically concluded that:

We absolutely must not go to war with the Soviet Union as well. Surrounded by enemies on all sides, our situation would become one comparable to that now facing Germany. We would end up in a deplorable military situation.

After the Emperor nodded and thanked him for his hard work, Hirota bowed deeply and departed the room and its tense atmosphere.⁴¹ It would take another four months before he would be able to begin his negotiations with the Soviet Union.

Approaching the Soviet Ambassador

The Battle of Okinawa began in late March, and Prime Minister Koiso submitted his resignation to the Emperor on April 5. A senior statesmen conference was held that evening, attended by Hirota, Konoe, Hiranuma, Wakatsuki, Okada, Tōjō, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido, and President of the Privy Council Admiral Suzuki Kantarō.

Tōjō and Hiranuma made statements after Koiso’s letter of resignation was read aloud and presented. Hirota then spoke:

We absolutely must win. While there may be those who see things pessimistically, there is no country in this war who has not experienced defeat. Every nation has faced setbacks and managed to turn things around. Our next government must be one determined to win the war.

Faced with a change of government amidst the urgent military situation, Hirota had been unable to hold back this pained cry. He also said that “either the war or navy minister should become prime minister.” At this time, Sugiyama Hajime was war minister and Yonai Mitsumasa was the navy minister. With the war now in its final stage, he no longer called for a member of the imperial family as he had at the previous

conference. Instead, he pictured a military figure able to command the army and navy as prime minister.

However, it was President of Privy Council Suzuki Kantarō, one of the navy's elder statesmen, who was chosen.⁴² The Suzuki government would ultimately be the one to eventually accept the Potsdam Declaration, but that would take several more months.

The Suzuki government was formed on April 7, and Tōgō Shigenori returned to the position of foreign minister two days later. Hirota had strongly pushed for Tōgō's appointment and told him, "I want you to enter the cabinet and get this difficult situation under control." Hirota had not gotten along with Shigemitsu, the previous foreign minister, but he trusted Tōgō.

After returning to the position of foreign minister, Tōgō asked Hirota to open negotiations with the Soviets. Molotov had informed Ambassador Satō on April 5, the same day as Koiso's resignation, that the Soviet Union would not be extending the term of their neutrality pact. As such, the goal of the Suzuki government was for the Soviets to maintain a position of favorable neutrality and not enter the war against Japan.⁴³ Hirota's final act of public service would be his negotiations with Yakov Malik, the Soviet ambassador to Japan.

As he was preparing for these negotiations, Hirota's home in Harajuku was destroyed in an air raid on May 25, and he had no choice but to evacuate to his villa in Kugenuma. The Soviet embassy in Azabu was also damaged by bombs during this period, so Ambassador Malik took refuge at a hotel in Hakone.

Kameyama Kazuji, a former counselor at the Japanese embassy in Moscow, contacted Hirota after he returned to Japan and learned that Hoshi Hajime, one of Hirota's acquaintances, owned a villa in Hakone that was adjacent to the hotel where Malik was staying. Tōgō and Kameyama attempted to make the best use of Hirota's misfortune by having him move into Hoshi's villa and then "coincidentally" pay his respects to Malik.

The scenario was not a subtle one, but Hirota did as Tōgō requested and moved into Hoshi's villa in Hakone on May 31. On June 3, he visited the hotel where Malik was staying, supposedly by coincidence. While it is true that Hirota was an old acquaintance of Malik's, it seems likely that the Soviets realized that he had been given the important task of carrying out Soviet-Japanese negotiations aimed at ending the war.⁴⁴

When Hirota met Malik, he told him that "Japan desires the security of Asia; given that the Soviet Union controls so much of Asia, it is important that we work with you to find a basis for this security."

Malik responded by flattering Hirota, telling him that "of all Japan's ambassadors to the Soviet Union, Your Excellency was the most popular." Hirota played along, placing himself in the lineage of pro-Russian Japanese figures like Itō Hirobumi and Gotō Shinpei. Given the urgent military situation, their conversation seems far too vague and inconsequential.

The purpose of the meeting was less about carrying out actual negotiations, however, than it was about finding out each side's intentions. Tōgō had tasked Hirota with preventing Soviet entry into the war and maintaining a state of favorable

neutrality. But he had also cautioned Hirota not to ask for Soviet mediation toward ending the war yet. As such, Hirota had only been instructed to ascertain what the Soviet attitude toward that crucial request would be. Attempting to negotiate under these unquestionably very difficult circumstances, Hirota had no choice but to be ambiguous.

When the two met again on June 4, Hirota noted that “Japan and the Soviet Union have, over quite a long time, established a foundation through which we are able to carry out relations between us without any need for concern.” Malik merely responded that “we carried out a fair amount of study [to make it so].” Their discussions were not making progress, and Malik was likely unable to grasp what Hirota’s true motives were. Shortly after this meeting, the Gen’yōsha—Hirota’s starting point—was completely destroyed in a June 19 air raid.

When the two men met for the third time on June 24, Malik grew impatient and asked for “concrete proposals from the Japanese.” But Hirota gave only a vague response that “we want to mutually coordinate our position in Asia with Russia,” listing Manchukuo, China, and the “southern tropical areas of Asia” as issues between the two countries. While Hirota was, of course, in contact with Tōgō during the negotiations, the Suzuki government had been unable to agree to request Soviet mediation and instead placed more importance on using the talks to determine Soviet intentions. This meant that Hirota was unable to give any specifics, causing the talks to make no progress.

Finding himself in a difficult situation, Hirota finally proposed the two countries reach “an agreement establishing a relationship of non-aggression” when he met with Malik for the fourth time on June 29. In return, the Japanese military would withdraw from Manchuria after the end of the war among other things. Malik only responded that he “planned to convey the proposal to Moscow.”

When Hirota attempted to visit Malik again in early July, Malik refused, claiming illness. As such, the talks never produced any concrete results.⁴⁵

From Tōgō’s perspective, Hirota’s approach to the negotiations had been leisurely and lacked the necessary sense of urgency. But his attempts to spur Hirota to move faster had been rebuffed with a complaint that “hurrying too much will damage our position by exposing how vulnerable we are.” Tōgō lamented that “most of the senior statesmen and people in similar offices don’t seem to understand that Japan is in an extremely difficult position, both strategically and militarily.”⁴⁶

And yet, Hirota likely had a point as well. Tōgō had not given Hirota instructions to explicitly sound out the Soviets’ willingness to act as mediators to end the war. The Suzuki government was still unwilling to actually begin actively seeking an end to the war.

Surrender

Although Hirota would have had no way of knowing this, the Soviets had already told the British and Americans at the February 1945 Yalta Conference that they would enter the war against Japan three months after Germany's surrender. Given that Germany had surrendered unconditionally on May 8, it is unsurprising that Malik had begun to evade Hirota. Japan should have surrendered as quickly as possible rather than chase the illusion of the Soviet Union as mediator, but difficulties caused by domestic politics prevented it from doing so.

But there were those in Japan who proposed immediate surrender. These included none other than Ambassador to the Soviet Union Satō. He strenuously argued from Moscow that Japan should immediately surrender, with its sole condition being "preservation of the national polity (*kokutai*)."⁴⁷ The policy pursued by Hirota, the Soviet expert, stalled out while that offered by Satō, who Hirota had actually suggested to the Emperor should be removed, was correct. The theory that the United States would seek peace if struck with one more great blow still had its adherents in Japan, however, and Satō's rationality would not be readily accepted.

Not only did the foreign ministry not adopt Satō's position, but Tōgō kept the details of the Hirota-Malik talks from both Satō and Envoy to the Soviet Union Morishima Gorō. And rather than discussing surrender, the Suzuki government wasted July on the fantasy of sending Konoe to the Soviet Union. Busy with its preparations for entering the war against Japan, there was no way that the Soviets would have accepted him.⁴⁷

Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August, and the Soviet Union finally entered the war against Japan, making the situation that Hirota had most feared into a reality. At the Imperial Conference held late on the night of August 9, the "imperial decision" (*seidan*) was made to accept the Potsdam Declaration on the sole condition that the *kokutai* be preserved. At the senior statesmen conference held the following day, Hirota, Konoe, Hiranuma, and Okada belatedly announced that "we have no choice but to surrender unconditionally." This would be the final senior statesmen conference for the sixty-seven-year-old Hirota.⁴⁸

And as Hirota struggled to come to grips with the destruction of the Empire, he was arrested on suspicion of war crimes.

Notes

1. Harada Kumao, *Saionji-Kō to Seikyoku* [Prince Saionji and the Political Situation] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1951), 7:4.
2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ed., *Nihon Gaikō Nenpyō Nami Shuyō Bunsho* [Chronology and Major Papers on Japanese Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1965), 2:401.
3. Harada 7:387–88.
4. *Ibid.*, 8:46, 55–60.
5. *Ibid.*, 8:175–77, 180–83.
6. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 326.

7. Harada 8:194, 218.
8. *Ibid.*, 8:291. See also: Kido Kōichi, *Kido Kōichi Nikki* [The Diary of Kido Kōichi], ed. Kido Nikki Kenkyūkai (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1966), 2:805–07.
9. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai 327–29.
10. Dictated by Hirota Kōki, “Sankoku Dōmei Jōyaku Ikken” [] (March 7, 1947), *Tōkyō Saiban Hirota Kōki Moto Shushō Bengo Shiryō*, 144.
11. Harada 8:336–37.
12. House of Representatives, House of Peers, eds., *Gikai Seidō 70-Nenshi – Seitō Kaiha-hen* [A History of the 70 Years of Parliamentary Governance – Political Parties and Factions] (Tokyo: Ministry of Finance, 1961), 154; Mizuno Katsukuni, ed., *Kizokuin no Seiji Dantai to Kaiha* [The House of Peers’ Political Organizations and Factions] (Tokyo: Shadan Hōjin Shōyū Kurabu, 1984), 183–85.
13. Kido 2:892.
14. *Ibid.*, 2:917. See also: Itō Takashi, ed., *Takagi Sōkichi – Nikki to Jōhō* [Takagi Sōkichi – Diary and Information] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 2000), 2:577–78.
15. Tōgō Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen* [Signs of the Times] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1985), 227–28.
16. Nishi Haruhiko, *Watashi no Gaikō Hakusho* [My Diplomatic White Book] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū Shinsha, 1963), 174–75; Nishi Haruhiko, *Kaisō no Nihon Gaikō* [Reflections on Japanese Diplomacy] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1965), 119; Nishi Haruhiko, *Waga Gaikō to Zuisō* [Our Diplomacy and Essays] (Tokyo: Sazan Kurosu Asoshieitsu, 1985), 105.
17. Itō Takashi, Suetake Yoshiya, eds., *Hatoyama Ichirō/Kaoru Nikki* [The Diaries of Hatoyama Ichirō and Kaoru] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 1999), 288.
18. Yoshida Shigeru, *Kaisō 10-Nen* [10 Year Memoirs] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1958), 1:48–50. See also: Inoki Masamichi, *Hyōden Yoshida Shigeru* [Critical Biography of Yoshida Shigeru] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun, 1980) 2:381–85; Zaidan Hōjin Yoshida Shigeru Kinen Jigyō Zaidan, ed., *Yoshida Shigeru Shokan* [Correspondence of Yoshida Shigeru] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron, 1994), 661–62.
19. Hagihara Nobutoshi, *Tōgō Shigenori – Denki to Kaisetsu* [Tōgō Shigenori – Biography and Commentary] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1985), 285–89.
20. Tōgō 266–67.
21. Gunji Shigakkai, ed., *Daihon’ei Rikugunbu Sensō Shidō-han Kimitsu Sensō Nisshi* [Log of Confidential Operations - Imperial General Headquarters Army War Leadership Section] (Tokyo: Kinseisha, 1998), 192. See also: Army General Staff, ed., *Sugiyama Memo* (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 2005), 1:535–36.
22. Kido 2:927.
23. Terasaki Hidenari, Mariko Terasaki-Miller, eds., *Shōwa Tennō Dokuhaku-roku Terasaki Hidenari Goyōgakari* [The Monologue Record of Emperor Shōwa – The Diary of Special Aide Terasaki Hidenari] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1991), 73–74.
24. *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* (June 21, 1942).
25. “Shōwa 17-Nen Rikua Mitsudai Nikki” [War Ministry Asia Classified Journal] No. 38 1/3 (Ministry of War/Rikua Mitsudai Nikki/S-7–99/211, MOD); *Gen’yō* No. 12 (1982), 2; Ishii Itarō, *Ishii Itarō Nikki* [The Diary of Ishii Itarō], eds. Itō Takashi, Liu Jie (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron-sha, 1993), 612.
26. Tajiri Akiyoshi, *Tajiri Akiyoshi Kaisōroku – Hansei o Kaketa Chūgoku Gaikō no Kiroku* [The Memoirs of Tajiri Akiyoshi: A Record of the Half of My Life I Wagered on Diplomacy with China] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1977), 53.
27. Kiyosawa Kiyoshi, *Ankoku Nikki* [Darkness Diary] (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1979), 134.
28. Itō Takashi, Hirohashi Tadimitsu, Katashima Norio, eds., *Tōjō Naikaku Sōri Daijin Kimitsu Kiroku* [Secret Prime Ministerial Records of the Tōjō Government] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1990), 57, 174, 206–08, 223, 267, 387, 424, 440, 453.
29. Kiyosawa 134.
30. Morishima Yasuhiko, ed., *Shōwa no Dōran to Morishima Gorō no Shōgai* [The Strife of the Shōwa Period and the Life of Morishima Gorō] (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1985), 178–79.

31. Nihon Kindai Shiryō Kenkyūkai, ed., *Ōkura Kinmochi Nikki* [Diary of Ōkura Kinmochi] (Tokyo: Naiseishi Kenkyūkai, 1974), 151.
32. Suenaga Nobuo, “Hirota-Sensei to Kōkōkyo Jidai no Watashi” [Hirota-Sensei and My Time at the Kōkōkyo], *Gen’yō* No. 14 (1982), 4.
33. Kido 2:1120–28. See also: Gunji Shigakkai 2:556.
34. Nihon Kindai Shiryō Kenkyūkai 4:214, 268, 271, 280.
35. Itō Takashi, Takeda Tomoki, eds., *Shigemitsu Mamoru Saikō Sensō Shidōkai Gikiroku Shuki* [Shigemitsu Mamoru – Supreme Council for the Direction of the War Meeting Records and Notebooks] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shina, 2004), 51, 60.
36. “Dai Tōa Sensō Kankei Ikken Sensō Shūketsu ni Kan suru Nichiso Kōshō Kankei (Soren no Tainichi Sensen o Fukumu)” [Matters Related to the Great East Asian War – Relating to the Soviet-Japanese Negotiations on the Conclusion of the War (Including the Soviet Declaration of War on Japan)] Vol. 1 (A.7.0.0.9–55, MOFA). See also: Baba Akira, *Nichiro Sensō-go no Nichū Kankei* [Sino-Japanese Relations after the Russo-Japanese War] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1993), 442–48.
37. Morishima 180–83.
38. Shintō Kazuma, “Sōkan no Ji” [Remarks on the Beginning of Publication], *Gen’yō* No. 1 (1979), 1.
39. Tenmei ni Anzu Shuppan Iinkai, *Tenmei ni Anzu Shintō Kazuma Sono Hito to Ayumi* [Tenmei in Anzu: Shintō Kazuma – The Man and His Journey] (Tokyo: Tenmei ni Anzu Shuppan Iinkai, 1984), 90–92.
40. Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Seiden Hensan Iinkai, ed., *Tōyama Mitsuru-ō Seiden (Miteikō)* [Authentic Biography of Tōyama Mitsuru (Unfinished)], commentary by Nishio Yōtarō (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1981), iv-v.
41. Fujita Hisanori, *Jijūchō no Kaisō* [Memoirs of the Grand Chamberlain] (Tokyo: Chūkō Bunko, 1987), 48–54. See also: Kido Nikki Kenkyūkai, ed., *Kido Kōichi Kankei Bunsho* [Documents Related to Kido Kōichi] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1966), 493–95.
42. Kido 2:1186–94.
43. Tōgō 318–44; Hatano Sumio, “Hirota-Mariku Kaidan to Senji Nichiso Kankei” [The Hirota-Malik Talks and Wartime Soviet-Japanese Relations], *Gunji Shigaku* 29:4 (1994), 4–26.
44. Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai 354–68; “Dai Tōa Sensō Kankei Ikken Sensō Shūketsu ni Kan suru Nichiso Kōshō Kankei (Soren no Tainichi Sensen o Fukumu)” Vol. 1.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Satō Motohide, Kurosawa Fumitaka, eds., *GHQ Rekishi-ka Chinjutsuroku – Shūsenshi Shiryō* [Deposition Records of the GHQ History Section – Historical Materials on the End of the War] (Tokyo: Hara Shobo, 2002), 1:298–99.
47. Satō Naotake, *Kaiko 80-Nen* [80 Year Memoirs] (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 1963), 486–92; Morishima 198–209.
48. Terasaki 128–29.

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Chapter 8

The Tokyo Trails—An “Active Follower”



Abstract The eighth chapter is dedicated to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the Tokyo Trials). It covers his arrest on suspicion of Class-A war crimes and subsequent interrogation, followed by the trial itself. Hirota was famously silent throughout the trial, not speaking in his own defense, and this has helped give rise to a popular image in Japan that he was a tragic figure who, despite not being guilty of militarism, quietly accepted judgment for failing to stop Japanese aggression. This chapter attempts to provide a more detailed and nuanced description of his defense strategy. While Hirota did accept responsibility to a greater degree than the other defendants, he still put forward witnesses in his defense (albeit to limited effect) and was at least initially accepting of his defense team’s strategy of minimizing his guilt by blaming the army. He undermined his own defense, however, by preventing his team from submitting documents that would be harmful to other defendants at the trial, at least in part due to pressure from those defendants.

Suspicion of War Crimes

The Japanese people learned of Japan’s defeat at noon on August 15, 1945, when a recording of the Emperor’s voice was played over the radio. With Japan’s surrender and acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, it was placed under Allied occupation. Article 10 of the Potsdam Declaration had clearly stated that war criminals would be punished, and this provided the basis for the Tokyo Trials.

The end of the war found Hirota at an acquaintance’s home in Nerima. On September 11, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) ordered the arrest of Tōjō Hideki and thirty-nine others on suspicion of war crimes. SCAP ordered the arrest of a further fifty-nine on December 2, including Hiranuma Kiichirō. Hirota’s name was on this second list.

After being ordered to turn himself in, Hirota called the students at the Kōkōkyo and had a car sent there. He had taken great care over the years in fostering the Kōkōkyo; it was, in a way, his alter ego. One of the students soon arrived, and he

was warmly welcomed by Hirota and his wife Shizuko. Still, Hirota had to inform him of the seriousness of the situation.

Hirota eventually stammered out that “I will soon have to report to the American military headquarters, and it may be that I will not be able to meet with everyone at the Kōkōkyo for a while.”

The younger man went pale at the news. Hirota continued by telling him that “From here on, it will be a young man’s world. The rebuilding of Japan will rest on all of your shoulders, and I’ll be counting on you.” He then said in closing:

I just want to tell you this one thing. There was nothing untoward about my wartime actions. I certainly never betrayed my country. I have always put my life on the line for our country. And now that I have been summoned to appear, I plan to make no excuses.

The younger man was shocked, and his body trembled. But Hirota, who was wearing a traditional dress, had a faint smile on his face. Little did he know that this would be his final farewell to the students at the Kōkōkyo. And with his arrest, he was expelled from the House of Peers.¹

Questioning by the International Prosecution Service

“I plan to make no excuses.”

Leaving those words to his family and the students, Hirota was taken to Sugamo Prison on January 15, 1946. Six weeks of questioning by the International Prosecutorial Service (IPS) awaited him there. The IPS had been created by MacArthur to prepare for the Tokyo Trials, and its head was Joseph B. Keenan, an American. The IPS was overwhelmingly made up of Americans, and Keenan also served as chief prosecutor.

On January 29, he explained the course of events that had prevented Yoshida Shigeru from joining his cabinet to US Army Capt. Calhoun Phelps. He also readily admitted to belonging to the Gen’yōsha to Phelps, saying that “I was still a young man when I joined the Gen’yōsha, but I was convinced to become involved with them again after becoming a diplomat.”

He spoke with Phelps about the Gen’yōsha again on February 4, naming Ogata Taketora and Shintō Kazuma as other members. Phelps persistently pressed him on the group, and Hirota answered frankly and at length:

P: Was membership in the Gen’yōsha secret?

H: The Gen’yōsha had government approval. It was an incorporated group for supporting local youth.

P: Was Tōyama a key figure in the Gen’yōsha.

H: I believe so.

P: Didn’t you serve on the committee for Tōyama’s funeral in October 1944?

H: Yes, I served on the committee.

P: So, you were a member of the Gen’yōsha, correct?

H: As I discussed earlier, I was asked to join to help with youth education after returning from Great Britain, so I rejoined.

P: Did you belong to any organizations other than the Gen’yōsha?

H: Only the Gen’yōsha.²

While the IPS considered the Gen’yōsha and Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) to be ultranationalist groups and placed importance on their activities, the truth is that these groups had been less active since the late 1920s. Reading the transcripts, there is a definite sense that the IPS overestimated the significance of the Gen’yōsha.³

But why was Hirota so open about the organization? First, he was aware of his responsibility for the war and was generally cooperative when questioned. That he was aware that Shintō Kazuma, the president of the Gen’yōsha, was also being held in Sugamo Prison was likely another reason.

Hirota had met with Shintō Kiheita, Kazuma’s father and the fifth president of the group, prior to traveling to Tokyo from Fukuoka as a young man. It had been Kiheita who had introduced him to Tōyama Mitsuru. And it had been at the recommendation of Hirota (among others) that Kazuma had become the group’s tenth president during the war. Now, both he and Hirota were being held together as potential war criminals.

Hirota frequently ran into Shintō while taking walks in the prison’s gardens. On one occasion, he calmly told Shintō that “I will be satisfied so long as the facts come out in the trial. What sentence or punishment I receive is immaterial.”

On another occasion, Hirota visited Shintō’s room on the first floor of the prison and called Shintō’s name in a low voice. When Shintō approached the bars, Hirota told him that “You don’t need to worry. I did a good job explaining your situation.” He then left, saying nothing more.

In other words, Hirota knew that Shintō, the Gen’yōsha’s final president, was being held on suspicion of war crimes. He likely judged that this meant that he could not remain quiet regarding the group and thus told the IPS what he knew. This is what his words to Shintō were intended to convey.

Shintō had become the organization’s president toward the end of the Pacific War. He was never able to carry out any significant activities in the role, and the IPS had no choice but to acknowledge that. Just as Hirota had advised him, there was no need for Shintō to worry; he was released without issue and would later serve in the House of Representatives and become the mayor of Fukuoka. He greatly respected Hirota and tried to carry on his legacy as director of the Hirota Kōki Youth Training Association. He also worked to have a bronze statue of Hirota erected in front of the Fukuoka Art Museum.⁴

“Isn’t It Tantamount to a Declaration of War on China?”

The questioning of Hirota continued. On February 7, Phelps asked about the Manchurian Incident and Manchukuo. Hirota responded that Honjō Shigeru and Minami Jirō had been responsible for the incident.

On February 9, Phelps delved into the formulation of Hirota’s Three Principles. Hirota was cooperative and agreed that “the foreign minister [referring to himself] must take responsibility” for the principles. He also clarified that the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact while he was prime minister “was done with defending against Comintern propaganda in mind.” On February 13, he confirmed that he “did not oppose” the selection of Tōjō as prime minister.

On February 16, Arthur Sandusky, another US Army captain, joined the questioning. Phelps and Sandusky first probed into the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the provision of additional defense funding before turning to Hirota’s September 5, 1937 speech to the Diet:

P: You argued in this speech that “the only option remaining to the Empire is to deliver an overwhelming blow to the Chinese army as quickly as possible, crushing its will to fight.”

H: If you’re quoting from my speech, then I must have said that.

P: Isn’t saying that “justice demands that we deliver a crushing blow to China” quite a strong statement?

H: It certainly is fierce language.

P: Isn’t it tantamount to a declaration of war on China?

H: I must admit that it is.⁵

In truth, the speech that was read aloud to Hirota by his interrogators had not been given by him; it had actually been delivered by Prime Minister Konoe to each house of the Diet in substantially identical addresses.⁶ Hirota unfortunately failed to notice this and unwittingly admitted to having given a speech that was “tantamount to a declaration of war on China.”

On March 5, Sandusky questioned Hirota alone in English without an interpreter present. He handed Hirota a document that he described as an English translation of his Three Principles. Hirota countered that “This is the so-called ‘Amō Statement.’ I would ask that you not confuse it with the Three Principles.” The interrogators questioning Hirota had insufficient knowledge of Japan.

“An Active Follower”

Sandusky questioned Hirota again on March 8, 1946. While Hirota knew that he was not skilled at speaking in English, he agreed to have the day’s questions and answers conducted in English. On this day, Sandusky asked about the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Tripartite Pact, the beginning of the war with the United States, and Hirota’s relationship with Konoe. Hirota also discussed the Trautmann Mediation and the senior statesmen conferences in his answers. He was quite straightforward, even if it would be going too far to say that he was never evasive.

When Sandusky concluded the session by saying, “Today’s questioning is now over. You didn’t hide anything, and I thank you for that,” Hirota replied:

I intend to say everything that I know. But I don't want you to view this as an attempt to reduce my punishment. I don't want to do that. If I did something wrong, then I must be punished for it.

With his frankness and honesty, Hirota can be considered to have displayed Japanese virtues. Even so, whether that was the best approach to take as the IPS was narrowing down its list of Class A war criminal suspects is questionable.

In Sandusky's March 14 summary of Hirota's testimony, he concluded that Hirota was "an active follower after accomplishment of each phase of the expansion." He wrote that Hirota's "opposition to the Army's aggressive policies and actions seems to have been confined to polemics," and that he "may well be included in the first trial."

According to Sandusky, "Mr. HIROTA is typical of that large group of men, admittedly not militarists themselves, who submitted to Army pressure for control of the government and by condoning each aggression and accepting the fruits thereof gave impetus to the next aggression." In other words, the IPS was not sympathetic to Hirota's candor in his statements. Indeed, he was seen as representative of the civilian officials who had followed the army.

This led to Hirota's inclusion among the Class A war criminals on March 18. While not explicitly stated in any IPS materials, it seems undeniable that he was, at least in part, substituted for Konoe (who had committed suicide) as leader of the military's "active followers." But this does not mean that Hirota was necessarily seen as so serious an offender as to warrant the death penalty.⁷

On April 29—the Emperor's first birthday since the end of the war—IPS issued twenty-eight indictments, including for Hirota. According to Bert Röling, the Dutch justice, Hirota was included at the request of the Chinese, who wanted him to bear responsibility for the Nanjing Massacre.⁸

Beginning of the Trial

The Tokyo Trials began at Ichigaya Court on May 3, 1946. The defendants were the twenty-eight accused Class A war criminals, including Hirota. The justices came from America, Britain, China, the Soviet Union, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and India. William Webb, an Australian, served as president of the court. The justices' seats were set on a raised platform with eleven national flags displayed behind them.

The defendants were seated across from the justices, with the witness stand and the lawyers' seats located in between them. When Hirota and the other defendants were led into the courtroom by military police, they were divided into two rows. Hirota sat third from the left in the front row (viewed from the justices' position), in between Hata Shunroku and Minami Jirō. He frequently sat quietly with his eyes closed during the proceedings. He looked a bit haggard, but his now quite gray hair was always neatly trimmed, and his suit was meticulous.⁹ He had returned to

the appearance of a reserved diplomat; there was no longer any trace of the patriot evident in him.

After the defendants were seated, the indictments were read aloud at Chief Prosecutor Keenan’s request. The charges were divided into three categories: “crimes against peace” (Counts 1–36), “murder” (Counts 37–52), and “conventional war crimes and crimes against humanity” (Counts 53–55).

Of these, “crimes against peace” and “crimes against humanity” were *ex post facto* laws that had not previously existed. The prosecution asserted that Hirota was liable for forty-eight of the fifty-five charges. The court’s jurisdiction extended over the period between January 1, 1928 and September 2, 1945.

The defendants were arraigned on May 6, 1946. When Chief Justice Webb asked, “Hirota Kōki, do you plead guilty or not guilty?” Hirota answered, “not guilty” without any hesitation.¹⁰

While seemingly unremarkable, Hirota had actually caused problems for his lawyer Hanai Tadashi on this point. When Hanai had visited him in Sugamo Prison the day before and instructed him to plead not guilty, Hirota had replied “I can’t say that” and obstinately insisted that “I bear responsibility.”

A dumbfounded Hanai explained that “You can’t do that. If you don’t plead not guilty, there won’t be a trial.” Hirota then further annoyed him by responding, “Then you say it, Mr. Hanai.” As seen above, Hanai ultimately managed to persuade Hirota to enter a plea of not guilty, but those two words would be the only ones spoken by Hirota in court during the two and a half years of the Tokyo Trials.¹¹

The Prosecution’s Case and the Defense Rebuttal

Shortly after becoming accustomed to his new daily routine of being bused from Sugamo Prison to Ichigaya, Hirota was given the shocking news that his wife Shizuko had committed suicide at their villa in Kugenuma on May 18. Stunned, he requested through Hanai that arrangements be made to allow him to attend her funeral, but this was rejected by the court.¹² Arima Yoriyasu, a former agriculture minister in the Konoe government who was being held in Sugamo on suspicion of Class A war crimes, wrote in his diary that “Hirota’s face has looked remarkably haggard recently.”¹³

The prosecution began presenting its case in June, and Ogata Taketora, Shidehara Kijūrō, Wakatsuki Reijirō, and Puyi appeared as witnesses. It presented voluminous evidence related to the Manchurian Incident, the Second Sino-Japanese War, German-Italian-Japanese relations, Soviet-Japanese relations, and the Pacific War. Testimony on the Nanjing Massacre was offered not just by Chinese witnesses but also by two Americans: Miner Bates, a history professor at the University of Nanking, and John Magee, a priest. The prosecution finally rested its case in January 1947.

The defense’s case began on February 24, with an opening statement by Kiyose Ichirō, Tōjō Hideki’s attorney. Kiyose asserted that Japan had not conspired to conquer the world and attempted to justify the Pacific War by asserting that “after

paying the utmost care, Japan had reached a point where we had no other option than to act in self-defense.” This opening statement was intended to serve for all of the defendants.

Four defendants—Hirota, Shigemitsu Mamoru, Hiranuma Kiichirō, and Doihara Kenji—did not join this opening statement, however. David F. Smith, one of Hirota’s attorneys, stated in court that same day that “I have received clear instructions from Mr. Hirota that he does not agree with this opening statement.”¹⁴ Hirota said regarding the statement that, “I should have made every effort to prevent these wars and was unable to do so. Accordingly, I bear a heavy responsibility and cannot give my affirmation to this statement given today.”¹⁵ This was another example of Hirota’s awareness of his responsibility.

On April 11, Minami Jirō (who sat next to Hirota) became the first defendant to testify. Each defendant was only permitted to take the stand once, which means that Minami had decided that he would do so early on in the defense case.

Once it came for the prosecution’s cross-examination, however, British prosecutor Comyns Carr pressed Minami on his interactions with Foreign Minister Shidehara during the Manchurian Incident. This battle between Carr and Minami impressed on the defendants that it was not necessarily to their advantage to take the stand.¹⁶ The defense would continue to present its case until January 1948.

Defense Strategy

Hirota quietly watched the court proceedings. He had been assigned two lawyers, one American and one Japanese: Smith and Hanai. They were supported by two assistant defense attorneys, Andō Yoshirō and Morishima Gorō. Morishima, one of Hirota’s former subordinates at the foreign ministry and a graduate of the Shūyūkan, had joined his defense team since returning home from the Japanese embassy in the Soviet Union.

Heading to the court’s waiting room, Morishima asked Hirota through a wire mesh screen, “how should we conduct your defense?” The elderly Hirota only replied, “I leave that completely in all of your hands.” No matter how many times Morishima asked, he always received the same answer.¹⁷

While Hirota was seemingly indifferent to his own defense, that does not mean that he did not put forward any justifications for his actions. We can understand through materials left by Hanai that Hirota did in fact defend himself. While Andō and Morishima were former diplomats, Hanai was a professional attorney who would go on to serve as attorney general. I would like to first look at the record of a March 7, 1947 conversation between Hanai and Hirota as an example of Hirota’s own words.

On this day, Hirota stated that he had told Prime Minister Konoe, Foreign Minister Matsuoka, War Minister Tōjō, and Cabinet Planning Board Director Hoshino at the time of the signing of the Tripartite Pact that “by concluding this treaty, we have made American and Britain our outright enemies.” He said that “all of the senior statesmen present should be aware of it.”

These words differentiated Hirota from Matsuoka, Tōjō, and Hoshino, who were also defendants at the trials. Matsuoka died in June 1946 before a verdict was reached, and Tōjō and Hoshino would be sentenced to death by hanging and life imprisonment, respectively.¹⁸

Hirota experienced several bits of bad luck with his defense, however. First, his American attorney Smith was removed from the case in March 1947 by Chief Justice Webb for refusing to retract a statement that there had been “improper interference by the court.” Then Andō was elected to the House of Representatives in May and stepped down. Andō was replaced by Shibusawa Nobuichi, but this means that half of Hirota’s defense team changed in the space of a few months.¹⁹

Using the Army’s “Demands” as a Defense

Despite these changes, Hanai and Morishima continued to work on Hirota’s defense strategy with Hirota’s participation. I would like to look at the record of an August 29, 1947 conversation between Hirota and his defense team to illustrate his involvement.

This conversation concerned Hirota’s relationship with the army, and he told Morishima that “the army was often coercive, invoking the ‘collective will of the army’ (*rikugun no sōi*) and demanding that I or the government do what it wanted.” He gave three “notable instances” of such behavior that he “clearly remembered”: the army’s March 1936 interference in the selection of Hirota’s cabinet; the conflict with the army that led to the fall of the Hirota government in January 1937; and the hardline stance taken by the army prior to his resignation as foreign minister in May 1938.

On the first of these, Hirota said that:

When I received the imperial mandate in March 1936 and began forming a government, Terauchi – the chosen war minister – interfered in the selection of cabinet members in various ways, invoking the “collective will of the army.” It was particularly difficult for me to choose cabinet officers from the political parties. I had planned to include two from each party, which Terauchi demanded be reduced to one each. I held firm, however, and he ultimately agreed to two each.

There is no question that Terauchi did interfere in the selection of Hirota’s cabinet as asserted here.

On the second point:

There was an argument between Diet Member Hamada and War Minister Terauchi in the Diet in January 1937. Terauchi then demanded that the Diet be dissolved, invoking the collective will of the army. But I and the cabinet were opposed. I put the Diet into recess twice as I negotiated with him, but he stubbornly continued to demand dissolution, and I ultimately decided to have the cabinet resign. I warned Terauchi that his resignation letter should be consistent with those of the other cabinet officers, but he refused and instead submitted a different one.

It is true that, when Terauchi became enraged by the Harakiri Exchange with Hamada and demanded that the Diet be dissolved, Hirota chose instead to resign. But his reason

for resigning was a halfhearted one: the idea that the war and navy ministers should not argue at cabinet meetings. He did not resist Terauchi to the degree he claimed here.

But what of the third example? Hirota continued:

When I was foreign minister in the Konoe government, War Minister Terauchi demanded that Prime Minister Konoe create the East Asia Development Board, invoking the collective will of the army. But I stubbornly resisted the board's creation. Ishii should have detailed knowledge of this, so I would ask that you discuss it with him.

Hirota describes an army "demand" for the creation of the East Asia Development Board here, but this is either a misunderstanding or a failure of his memory. Sugiyama, not Terauchi, was war minister during the 1st Konoe government when Hirota served his second term as foreign minister. And the East Asia Development Board was created in December 1938, after Hirota had left the cabinet. The organization being discussed while Hirota was present was the East Asia Office or China Board, and it would be an exaggeration to say that Hirota "stubbornly" resisted its creation.

And while Hirota had confidently stated that "Ishii should have detailed knowledge of this"—a reference to East Asian Affairs Bureau Director Ishii Itarō—he presumably would have denied this even if asked. Morishima wrote in his notes that this third example was "not needed."

The records of these conversations with Hirota make clear that his defense team intended to shift responsibility to the army and its "demands." That Hirota spoke emphatically about having resisted the army despite knowing this was an exaggeration suggests that he was on board with this defense strategy. There is a tendency to see Hirota as having been indifferent to his defense during the trial, but he seems to have actually been conflicted and wavered over what to do. It is natural to see his actions here as indicating a desire to reduce his degree of guilt if possible. At the very least, it is difficult to imagine that he foresaw receiving a death sentence at this point.²⁰

It is a little difficult to believe that this defense strategy of shifting blame to the army would have been effective, however, as Hirota had agreed (albeit unenthusiastically) with the Konoe government's decisions to dispatch troops to China and to provide additional military funding. He had failed to raise the matter of the Nanjing Massacre at cabinet meetings, and he had also personally attempted to impose stiffer peace conditions on China and then rejected the Nationalist government. It would have been difficult for his defense team to formulate a basic strategy for how to respond when pressed on these points by the prosecution.

Hirota and his lawyers were presumably aware of the weakness of this defense but felt they had no better option available to them. In any case, as the trial reached the point where each defendant put forward their personal defense, Hirota was unable to continue with his defense team's blame shifting strategy. This is because he knew that he bore responsibility and was reluctant to subject himself to the pressure that would come from the army defendants that such a strategy would target. I would like to examine this aspect next.

Individual Defenses

On September 5, 1947, the dismissed Smith was replaced by George Yamaoka as Hirota’s American attorney. Yamaoka was a *nisei* from Seattle who understood Japanese.

In Ichigaya, the trial concluded the collective rebuttal phase and moved on to the individual defense phase. This phase began on September 10 with Araki Sadao, who took the stand in his own defense. He was the first defendant to testify since Minami had earlier. Sixteen months had now passed since the opening of the trial, and the defendants’ individual defenses proceeded in alphabetical order: Araki, Doihara Kenji, Hashimoto Kingorō, Hata Shunroku, Hiranuma Kiichirō, and finally, Hirota.

Hirota’s individual defense began on September 25 with an opening statement by Yamaoka. He described Hirota as having “always [pursued a foreign policy] of peace, goodwill, and cooperation between all nations” and defended his response to the Nanjing Massacre:

Ambassador Grew forwarded protests from missionaries and other groups in Nanjing concerning the atrocities committed by the Japanese military from December 13, 1937 on to the foreign ministry. Despite not knowing the veracity of these reports, Mr. Hirota, acting in his capacity as the head of the foreign ministry, accepted them as substantive and ordered the relevant officials to forward them to the Ministry of War to be reported to the military high command.

In other words, Yamaoka asserted Hirota’s innocence by claiming—based on conversations with US Ambassador Grew—that he had lodged protests with the army concerning the Nanjing Massacre. He further attempted to have transcripts of oral statements by Grew admitted as evidence of Hirota’s efforts to avoid war, but Chief Justice Webb rejected this following an objection by Prosecutor Carr.²¹

As is well known, Hirota declined to take the stand in his own defense. This was not particularly unusual, as eight others elected to do the same: Doihara Kenji, Hata Shunroku, Hiranuma Kiichirō, Hoshino Naoki, Kimura Heitarō, Satō Kenryō, Shigemitsu Mamoru, and Umezu Yoshijirō.

In many of these cases, it was because their defense teams had judged that testifying would not be beneficial to their cases; they did not know what evidence the prosecution would offer in rebuttal, and this caused uneasiness. Hirota’s acknowledgment of his own responsibility also placed him at odds with Morishima over his defense strategy.²²

Witness Testimony

Hirota not taking the stand naturally meant that his fate was largely dependent on the testimony of defense witnesses, many of whom came from the foreign ministry. In all, ten witnesses appeared on his behalf:

1. Kameyama Kazuji—former counselor at the Japanese embassy in Moscow

2. Kuwashima Kazue—East Asian Affairs Bureau director during the 1st Konoe government
3. Tsugita Daisaburō—Legal Affairs Bureau director during the Hirota government
4. Ino Hiroya—agriculture minister during the 1st Konoe government
5. Horinouchi Kensuke—vice-minister of foreign affairs during the Hirota and 1st Konoe governments
6. Hidaka Shinrokurō—counselor at the Japanese embassy in China during the 1st Konoe government
7. Okamoto Suemasa—Shanghai consul-general during the 1st Konoe government
8. Ishii Itarō—East Asian Affairs Bureau director during the 1st Konoe government
9. Arita Hachirō—foreign minister during the Hirota government
10. Matsudaira Yasumasa— former chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal

With the exception of Tsugita, Ino, and Matsudaira, all were diplomats. The testimony of Kuwashima, Horinouchi, and Ishii was especially impactful as they had been Hirota’s immediate subordinates. And Arita had been his foreign minister. I would thus like to now follow the back and forth between the defense and prosecution over these four figures’ testimony.

On September 26, Kuwashima testified in favor of Hirota’s actions during his first term as foreign minister. Carr began his cross-examination of Kuwashima on the 29th.

Carr asked about the Amō Statement:

C: You say that HIROTA reprimanded AMAU because of this statement.

K: Yes. I heard this from Mr. HIROTA himself.

C: Was he punished?

K: I don’t believe he did.

C: Was not AMAU’s real fault for which he was reprimanded, if he was reprimanded, that he had been so careless to disclose to the public the instructions that were being sent to the Japanese representatives in China?

K: I believe that he was reprimanded not only for having been careless but also for the fact that he made his statement in such a way as to cast suspicion on Japan that that was the real foreign policy whereas it was not.

Carr thus elicited testimony that Hirota had not held Amō to account for the statement. His cross-examination was impactful because it was based on the contents of Harada Kumao’s diary.²³

“Don’t Submit the Materials to the Court”

Before turning to the testimony of Horinouchi, Ishii, and Arita, I would like to first look at the back and forth between Hirota and Morishima.

While working on Hirota's defense, Morishima had been preparing “the most important evidence exposing the army's misconduct” for submission to the court. These were documents from the time of the Hirota government that had been provided by Arita Hachirō. While these documents would be advantageous to Hirota's defense, they would be damaging for Itagaki Seishirō, who had been chief of staff for the Kwantung Army during the period in question. Itagaki thus “went after Hirota with great energy” to prevent this.

Hirota then instructed Morishima “not to submit the materials related to Itagaki to the court.” While he had initially been on board with his defense team's strategy of shifting blame onto the army, he had always been conflicted about it as it clashed with his own sense of responsibility. Itagaki's forcefulness seems to have been enough to push him over the edge and make him fold.

Having gone to great lengths to obtain the documents and having intended to have Arita provide testimony about them, Morishima “could not agree to stop just because Itagaki had complained to Hirota.” After confirming that Hirota would not change his mind, Morishima resigned as assistant defense counsel on September 29, only days into Hirota's individual defense. Masao, Hirota's third son, succeeded him in the role.²⁴

It is unknown what exactly the materials provided by Arita were. But given that Itagaki wrote in his diary on September 29 that “I lodged a protest with Hirota” and “Arita is planning to appear in court again,” there is no question that Hirota faced strong opposition from Itagaki on this point.²⁵

Horinouchi took the stand on September 30, October 1, and October 2, just after Morishima's departure. Having served as vice-minister during the Hirota government and Hirota's second term as foreign minister, he was able to provide detailed testimony about Hirota's foreign policy during the Second Sino-Japanese War. He provided a written deposition in which he testified that Hirota had pursued a policy of non-expansionism following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, had attempted to pursue peace through the Trautmann and Funatsu mediations, and that the wording of the “will not deal with” statement had been intended to leave room for negotiations with China.

Carr naturally pressed Horinouchi sharply on all of these points during his cross-examination. This is how he asked Horinouchi about the Konoe government's July 11, 1937 decision to send troops to China:

The cabinet decided on the 11th of July that those reinforcements were to be sent. When the news came that the Chinese had accepted the Japanese army's terms, did Mr. HIROTA take no steps to find out whether that reinforcement had been cancelled or was continuing?

Horinouchi answered that he was “unaware of any steps taken by the foreign minister.” He thus conceded that Hirota had not looked into any cancellation of the preparations for mobilization or the sending of troop reinforcements.

Carr also pressed Horinouchi on the Battle of Shanghai and the peace efforts with China. His questions were backed up by a wealth of resources, including Harada Kumao's diary and official documents, and Horinouchi could often only stammer out

“I do not recall” in response.²⁶ While his appearance had been intended to bolster Hirota’s defense, Horinouchi was not able to adequately perform that task.

Counterproductive Subordinate Testimony

Ishii Itarō took the stand on October 3. After he gave testimony on Hirota’s foreign policy during his second term as foreign minister, Carr pressed him on the Nanjing Massacre:

C: Did you report all the information you received to Mr. HIROTA?

I: I reported all of it to the foreign minister.

C: Did [the Information Department] report to you and to Mr. HIROTA that the press of the world was full of denunciation of the rape of Nanking?

I: Yes, I received reports each time such references were made.

C: And to whom were these reports circulated?

I: I think they were circulated to the minister, vice-minister, and all bureau directors.

C: Were they circulated to the members of the cabinet?

I: That I do not recall.

In other words, according to Ishii, Hirota received information on the Nanjing Massacre but did not show that information to the cabinet. Carr also asked:

C: Now, did HIROTA bring this matter before the cabinet?

I: I have not heard that it was presented to the cabinet. However, Foreign Minister HIROTA referred the question to the War Minister.

C: But you have told me that the reports continued to come in from Nanking that the atrocities were continuing after that?

I: I don’t think that Foreign Minister HIROTA took up this question with the War Minister frequently or many times. I think it was once or twice.

C: But I am asking you whether he took it up with anyone else.

I: I do not know.²⁷

Ishii effectively testified that Hirota had taken almost no action despite being fully aware of the Nanjing Massacre. The impression that his testimony had on the court was that Hirota had been criminal in his inaction, almost as if Ishii had been a prosecution witness. He had fallen into Carr’s trap, and the decision to have him testify had clearly backfired on the defense. Shigemitsu wrote in his diary about the “grave consequences” of Ishii’s appearance in court:

While Ambassador Ishii Itarō (the then Asian Affairs Bureau director) testified that [Hirota] did all he could at the home ministry, it was made clear under cross-examination that Hirota had had full knowledge of the Nanjing Massacre through reports. This had grave consequences for him.²⁸

Arita Hachirō followed Ishii at the witness stand. In a sworn affidavit, he testified as to why he had recommended Hirota become a councilor for the Yonai government: “I recommended Mr. Hirota because I was aware that he held sound diplomatic views and did not support the Tripartite Pact.”

While Arita—who had been Hirota’s choice as foreign minister during his government—emphasized Hirota’s opposition to the Tripartite Pact in his testimony, he did not touch upon other key issues, perhaps because Hirota had personally prevented the documents provided by Arita from being submitted as evidence because they implicated Itagaki.

Arita also should have been able to make statements concerning the Hirota government’s Fundamentals of National Policy and the Anti-Comintern Pact that would have been advantageous to Hirota’s defense. And yet, Arita’s testimony was brief, as was Carr’s cross-examination.²⁹ Arita had been purged by the Occupation authorities from holding public office, and he had told Morishima prior to his appearance that:

I’m in a precarious position where I could either become a defendant at the trials in Ichigaya or escape that fate, so I would prefer not to appear in court if possible. But, if my doing so will truly be helpful for Hirota’s defense, then I will.

One gets the impression that Arita may have refrained from making in-depth statements out of a fear that he could implicate himself by doing so.³⁰

Hirota’s portion of the individual defense phase came to a close with this inept defense. Having decided not to take the stand himself, Hirota could only watch the back and forth between his witnesses and the prosecution. He did have some emotional support in the courtroom, however, as his daughters Miyoko and Toyoko attended every single day. He would occasionally turn toward them in the gallery and nod as if to give them reassurance. And Masao, one of his sons, was serving as assistant defense counsel.

The trial then continued to the other defendants in order: Hoshino Naoki, Itagaki Seishirō, Kaya Okinori, Kido Kōichi, Kimura Heitarō, Koiso Kuniaki, Minami Jirō, Mutō Akira, Oka Takazumi, Ōshima Hiroshi, Satō Kenryō, Shigemitsu Mamoru, Shimada Shigetarō, Shiratori Toshio, Suzuki Teiichi, Tōgō Shigenori, Tōjō Hideki, and Umezu Yoshijirō. Chief Justice Webb returned to Australia for a month, but this did not cause a recess in the trial.

The defense case concluded on January 12, 1948. This was followed by rebuttals from the prosecution and defense and finally each side’s closing arguments. Hirota’s closing argument was given by Yamaoka on March 17 and 18. After the defense’s close ended on April 15, Hirota waved to his daughters in the gallery and then disappeared.³¹ The Tokyo Trials remained in recess until November as the verdicts were deliberated on.

Notes

1. Suenaga Nobuo, “Hirota-Sensei to Kōkōkyo Jidai no Watashi” [Hirota-Sensei and My Time at the Kōkōkyo], *Gen’yō* No. 14 (1982), 4.

2. Awaya Kentarō, Yoshida Yutaka, eds., *Kokusai Kensatsukyoku (IPS) Jinmon Chōsho* [International Prosecution Service (IPS) Interrogation Records] (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Sentā, 1993), 28:343–82; John G. Ruth, *Sugamo Jinmon Chōsho* [Sugamo Interrogation Records], ed. Higurashi Yoshinobu, trans. Yamada Yutaka (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun-sha, 1995), 170–73. Research on the Tokyo Trials includes: Higurashi Yoshinobu, *Tōkyō Saiban no Kokusai Kankei – Kokusai Seiji ni Okeru Kenryoku to Kihan* [The International Relations of the Tokyo Trials – Power and Norms in International Politics] (Tokyo: Bokutakusha, 2002); Awaya Kentarō, *Tōkyō Saiban e no Michi* [The Road to the Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2006).
3. Awaya Kentarō, *Tōkyō Saiban e no Michi*, 2:137–38.
4. Shintō Kazuma, “Hirota-Sensei no Sugamo Jidai o Kataru” [Speaking About Hirota-Sensei’s Time in Sugamo], *Gen’yō* No. 17 (1983), 1; Tenmei ni Anzu Shuppan Inkaï, *Tenmei ni Anzu Shintō Kazuma Sono Hito to Ayumi* [Tenmei in Anzu: Shintō Kazuma – The Man and His Journey] (Tokyo: Tenmei ni Anzu Shuppan Inkaï, 1984), 90–91, 101–03; Awaya, *IPS*, 22:371–405.
5. *Ibid.*, 28:383–440. See also: Ruth 173–75.
6. Stenographic Record of the 72nd Imperial Diet – House of Peers, Stenographic Record of the 72nd Imperial Diet – House of Representatives.
7. Awaya, *IPS*, 28:311–19, 441–83. See also: Ruth 196–209, 222–23.
8. B.V.A. Röling, A. Cassese, *Rērinku Hanji no Tōkyō Saiban – Rekishiteki Shōgen to Tenbō* [Justice Röling’s Tokyo Trials – Historical Testimony and Perspective], trans. Kosuge Nobuko (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1996), 56.
9. Asahi Shimbun Hōtei Kishidan, *Tōkyō Saiban* [The Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Tōkyō Saiban Kankōkai, 1962), 1:166.
10. Nitta Michio, ed., *Kyokutō Kokusai Gunji Saiban Sokkiroku* [Stenographic Records of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East] (Tokyo: Yūshōdō Shoten, 1968), 7.
11. Nomura Masao, ed., *Hōshō Fūunroku* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1966), 2:366–67.
12. “Kyokutō Kokusai Gunji Saiban Bengo Kankei Shiryō 861 Dai 5-Rui (2) Sono 13” [Defense Materials for the International Military Tribunal for the Far East 861 Class 5 (2) 13] (Honkan-4A-019–00 Hei 11 Hōmu 03,436,100, NA); Ruth 225.
13. Shōyū Kurabu, Itō Takahashi, eds., *Arima Yoriyasu 1 Sugamo Gokuchū Jidai* [The Diary of Arima Yoriyasu (1) – In Sugamo Prison] (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1997), 264, 298.
14. Nitta 4:421, 410.
15. Asahi Shimbun Hōtei Kishidan 1:791. See also: Nitta 4:410; Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 387–88.
16. Nitta 5:4–63.
17. Morishima Yasuhiko, ed., *Shōwa no Dōran to Morishima Gorō no Shōgai* [The Strife of the Shōwa Period and the Life of Morishima Gorō] (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1985), 300.
18. Dictated by Hirota Kōki, “Sankoku Dōmei Jōyaku Ikken” [Related to the Tripartite Pact] (March 7, 1947), *Tōkyō Saiban Hirota Kōki Moto Shushō Bengo Shiryō*, 144.
19. Morishima 300.
20. Statement by Hirota Kōki to Morishima Gorō (August 29, 1947), *Tōkyō Saiban Hirota Kōki Moto Shushō Bengo Shiryō*, 145.
21. Nitta 6:740–46.
22. Asahi Shimbun Hōtei Kishidan 2:191–92.
23. Nitta 6:741–75.
24. Morishima 302–03, 333.
25. Itagaki Seishirō Kankōkai, ed., *Hiroku Itagaki Seishirō* [Confidential Record of Itagaki Seishirō] (Tokyo: Fuyō Shobō, 1972), 436.
26. Nitta 6:790–827.
27. *Ibid.*, 7:7–12.
28. Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Sugamo Nikki* [Sugamo Diary] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū Shinsha, 1953), 273.
29. Nitta 7:12–14.
30. Morishima 302.
31. Asahi Shimbun Hōtei Kishidan 2:29.

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Chapter 9

Conclusion—Departure



Abstract The book’s conclusion looks at the verdict against Hirota and the rationale provided by the court. It then offers an appraisal of the verdict before giving a detailed portrayal of how the execution was carried out. The chapter closes with a brief appraisal of Hirota’s diplomatic record, including a discussion of the fundamental difficulties that any 1930s attempt at a Sino-Japanese partnership would have faced.

Hirota and Tōgō

Hirota slowly spent the months until the verdict in Sugamo Prison. He would watch the other prisoners play *go* with great interest, but he never said anything or attempted to play himself.

Internally, he was concerned about Japan’s future. Hirota “concluded that there was a strong possibility that Japan would fall into the hands of communism,” a belief shared by Mutō Akira. It had been Mutō who had pushed War Minister Terauchi to interfere with the formation of Hirota’s cabinet, but they were now relaxed with one another.¹

Tōgō Shigenori was likely the defendant who Hirota was most concerned about. He had felt responsible when the prosecution had made allegations about Tōgō’s time as ambassador to Germany, as he had been the one who had appointed Tōgō to the position in December 1937 as foreign minister.

Hirota had intended to appoint Tōgō as ambassador to the Soviet Union while he was prime minister, but when he yielded the position of foreign minister to Arita Hachirō early on in his premiership, he made Shigemitsu Mamoru ambassador instead in accordance with Arita’s wishes. His appointment of Tōgō to Germany after he returned to the position of foreign minister in the 1st Konoe government had been the next best option, but that decision had now placed Tōgō in jeopardy. He commented to Tōgō multiple times that “it would have been better for Japan and saved you all this trouble if I had just made you ambassador to the Soviet Union as originally planned.”²

Hirota may have been concerned about Tōgō's fate, but it would not be long before the verdicts from the Tokyo Trials' verdicts were delivered, and he discovered he had received a much more severe sentence.

Verdicts

After several months of recess, the defendants were transported to Ichigaya by bus and court resumed on the morning of November 4, 1948. With the exception of Hiranuma Kiichirō, Shiratori Toshio, and Umezu Yoshijirō (who were absent due to illness), the defendants all watched carefully as Chief Justice Webb stated, "I will now read the judgement of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East." He then began reading.

The judgment was composed of ten chapters:

- I. Establishment and Proceedings of the Tribunal
- II. The Law
- III. Obligations Assumed and Rights Acquired by Japan
- IV. The Military Domination of Japan and Preparation for War
- V. Japanese Aggression Against China
 - a. Invasion and Occupation of Manchuria
 - b. Consolidation and Exploitation of Manchuria
 - c. The Plan to Advance Further into China
 - d. From the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (7 July 1937) to the Konoye Declaration of 16 January 1938
 - e. The Provisional Government in North China
 - f. Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere
 - g. Japan's Economic Domination of Manchuria and Other Parts of China
- VI. Japanese Aggression Against the USSR
- VII. The Pacific War
- VIII. Conventional War Crimes (atrocities)
- IX. Findings on Counts of the Indictments
- X. Verdicts³

The judgment was 1,218 pages long in English. And the only person allowed to read it out was Chief Justice Webb. The reading of the judgment took seven days.

Hirota's foreign policy and government were occasionally mentioned and denounced in the judgment's text. It also contained clear factual errors, such as a statement that "Hirota became Japan's foreign minister and a member of the Supreme War Council." The Japanese in the courtroom could not help but laugh bitterly and become irritated at the mistakes. Even so, Hirota remained motionless with his eyes closed, and he did not comment on the judgment when he met with his son Masao.⁴

Does this behavior mean that Hirota had a good idea of what the judgment would be, even before the verdicts were read? Not at all. Over the course of the week-long

reading of the judgment, Hirota consulted with his former subordinate Shigemitsu on various matters, laying bare his anxieties in the process.

When Shigemitsu attempted to calm Hirota by telling him that “This may be a military tribunal, but they must understand that we have spent our lives promoting the diplomacy of peace, striving to prevent war. I do not believe that they would sentence such people to death.” As if attempting to convince himself, Hirota replied, “I believe the same thing.” As the verdict approach, Hirota was overcome with an endless feeling of anxiety.⁵

* * *

On the afternoon of November 11, the bus carrying the defendants was approaching Jigokuzaka in Ichigaya. Standing on the side of the street were Hirota’s children. Masao, Miyoko, and Toyoko frantically waved handkerchiefs as the bus passed by. Masao had served as assistant defense counsel, and Miyoko and Toyoko had not missed a single day of their beloved father’s trial. Now there was only one day left.

Noticing his children through a gap in the bus’s covered windows, Hirota jumped up from his seat and frantically waved his hat. Filled with happiness and heartbreak, he continued to wave his hat at his children as the bus passed by. The other defendants gasped at the sudden change in demeanor from the normally seemingly emotionless Hirota.⁶

“Criminal Negligence”—Death by Hanging

The Tokyo Trials finally drew to a close on the following day, November 12. The courtroom was packed with spectators and journalists wanting to witness the historic moment. After the eleven justices calmly entered the courtroom, Chief Justice Webb, wearing robes, read Chapter IX of the judgment: “Findings on Counts of the Indictments.” Of the fifty-five counts, the court found that only ten—Counts 1, 27, 29, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 54, and 55—were proven; all others were dismissed.

Moving on to Chapter X—Verdicts, the heart of the judgment, Webb found all twenty-five defendants guilty of some of the ten proven counts.

While the judgment against Hirota took the adoption of the Fundamentals of National Policy and the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact while he was prime minister into account, it emphasized his role as foreign minister during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The tribunal found regarding “the basis on which the preparations to continue the China War and for waging further aggressive wars were carried out” in the early phase of the war that “all these plans and activities were fully known to and supported by HIROTA,” and that “he consistently agreed to the use of force if diplomatic negotiations failed to obtain fulfilment of the Japanese demands.”⁷

With regard to the Nanjing Massacre in particular, it found that “HIROTA was derelict in his duty in not insisting before the Cabinet that immediate action be taken

to put an end to the atrocities, failing any other action open to him to bring about the same result.” It therefore concluded that “his inaction amounted to criminal negligence.”⁸

Hirota was found guilty of Counts 1, 27, and 55 and not guilty on the other counts. These counts were conspiracy to commit wars of aggression, waging aggressive war following the Manchurian Incident, and disregarding the legal duty to take adequate steps to secure the observance of the laws of war. Put another way, while the prosecution had charged Hirota with forty-eight counts, the court found him guilty of only three. Hirota was relieved to have been found guilty of so few.

When the court recessed at 3:30 p.m., Hirota asked his lawyer Hanai whether “the punishment may be lighter depending on the circumstances?” When Hanai answered in the affirmative, Hirota replied, “Jeez, being confined for a long time would be the worst.”

Optimistic at having only been found guilty of three counts and believing the punishment would be light, Hirota seems to have expected to receive a jail term at most. But the justices placed unexpected importance on his “criminal negligence” with regard to the Nanjing Massacre, and he failed to fully grasp this. He would learn several minutes later in the packed courtroom that the number of counts and the severity of the sentence were unrelated.⁹

The sentences finally began to be read at 3:55. Each defendant was called one by one in alphabetical order. The first to be called was Araki Sadao, wearing morning dress. After Webb announced that “based on the counts of the indictment upon which the defendant has been found guilty, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East sentences the defendant to a term of life imprisonment,” Araki removed his earphones, silently bowed, and left the room.

Doihara Kenji, the next defendant, was sentenced to death by hanging. After the next three men—Hashimoto Kingorō, Hata Shunroku, and Hiranuma Kiichirō—were each sentenced to life, Hirota was called.

Wearing his usual suit, he slowly approached the stand with a tense look on his face and put on his earphones.

“On the counts of the indictment on which you have been convicted, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East sentences you to death by hanging.”¹⁰

Understanding Webb’s English, Hirota removed his earphones before the Japanese translation was provided. What awaited the seventy-year-old Hirota at the end of the two-and-a-half-year long trial was a death sentence.

Despite having received the worst of all possible outcomes, Hirota’s expression did not change. After bowing deeply to the judges, he looked for his ever-present daughters in the gallery. Finding them, he made a slight bow to them with his eyes closed and then left the courtroom as if nothing had happened. He had exchanged glances with them on many previous occasions, but his silent bow on this day was meant as a farewell.

Six to Five

As the only death sentence to be handed down to a civilian official, Hirota's sentence caused a great stir in the courtroom. Afterwards, Hirota told Ōshima Hiroshi that "this verdict was like being struck by a bolt of lightning." He obviously did not foresee being sentenced to death.¹¹

In all, seven defendants were sentenced to death: Hirota, Doihara, Itagaki Seishirō, Kimura Heitarō, Matsui Iwane, Mutō Akira, and Tōjō Hideki. With the exception of Hirota, all were army officers. Tōgō Shigenori and Shigemitsu Mamoru were sentenced to twenty and seven years, respectively. The remaining defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment. Hirota was the only one to pay attention to the gallery as the verdicts were being read. He was in poor health but took advantage of a short recess to meet with his daughters in the defendants' waiting room.¹²

Six of the eleven justices had voted for Hirota's death sentence: those representing the United States, the United Kingdom, China, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Canada. Mei Ruao, the Chinese justice, considered Hirota a war criminal on par with Doihara and Itagaki.¹³

But Justices Bernard (France), Zaryanov (USSR), and Pal (India) were not in favor of executing Hirota. Chief Justice Webb opposed the death penalty in all cases.

Justice Röling of the Netherlands agreed with six of the seven death sentences but maintained that Hirota was not guilty. He believed that holding defendants liable for inactions in matters such as the Nanjing Massacre was an overly broad interpretation.¹⁴ He later wrote that "under my deeply held beliefs, the facts raised and proven against [Hirota] were not crimes against peace."¹⁵

Thus, Hirota's death sentence had been approved by the narrow vote of six to five. The other death sentences were approved by a vote of seven to four. Webb, Bernard, Pal, and Röling wrote dissenting opinions, but these were not read aloud in court.

The Tokyo Trials included the ex post facto laws of "crimes against peace" and "crimes against humanity," but Allied action such as the Soviet entry into the war and the American use of the atomic bombs were excluded from its jurisdiction. Several elements of the trials are genuinely baffling, and it is no surprise that there are those who refer to them as "victor's justice." It would be difficult to deny that they were political in nature. But "conventional war crimes"—atrocities—weighed heavily in the issuing of death sentences, and Hirota's "criminal negligence" in the Nanjing Massacre would fall into that category.

There were doubtless many who felt like Amō Eiji (who was also being held in Sugamo Prison) who "wished that Hirota and the others had boldly spoken less about their responsibility [for the war] and more about their policies."¹⁶ But what would Hirota taking the stand have brought? He would have had no choice but to concede, when pressed by the prosecution on his approval for the mobilization of troops in the early stages of the Second Sino-Japanese War and his failure to bring the Nanjing Massacre to the attention of the cabinet, that what they said was true.

Today, Hirota's decision not to take the stand in his own defense is spoken of as a laudable act, but it should not be assumed that personally testifying would have

worked to his benefit. This is readily evident from the prosecution cross-examination of his subordinates Horinouchi Kensuke and Ishii Itarō. The prosecution was far better prepared than Hirota's defense team when it came to addressing the Nanjing Massacre.

Bidding Farewell to His Family

After their departure from the Ichigaya courtroom, the seven men sentenced to death were immediately separated from the other Class A war criminals. They boarded a separate bus in which they were outnumbered by military police. As the bus turned to descend Jigokuzaka on its way to Sugamo Prison, Hirota's children forlornly waved their handkerchiefs. That Hirota immediately stood up and waved back goes without saying.

Back at Sugamo, the condemned men were physically escorted by military police officers up the stairs. After being strip searched, they were taken to new cells that lacked tatami mats. Bedding and clothes had been thrown into the dusty solitary cells. It seems likely that it was only when the heavy iron door slammed shut that the reality that he had been condemned to death hit Hirota.¹⁷

Hirota's death sentence was widely seen as surprising. Groups circulated petitions in Tokyo and his hometown of Fukuoka for a reduction in his sentence, gathering tens of thousands of signatures. Retired foreign ministry officials like Shidehara Kijūrō and Matsudaira Tsuneo also worked hard appealing on his behalf. But Hirota personally "sternly warned [his son Masao] to absolutely not petition for a reduction in his sentence."¹⁸

On November 29, two weeks after being sentenced to death, Hirota was permitted to meet with his children. All of his surviving children, Hiroo, Masao, Chiyoko, Miyoko, and Toyoko were there. With his execution looming, the meeting was for only an hour and took place across metal bars.

When his two sons and three daughters were led in by American military police officers, Hirota was wearing US Army fatigues. His eldest son Hiroo opened a large package and gave Hirota some clothes. It was the first time in a while that he had been able to meet all of his children. Toyoko, his youngest, was only thirty-two. His son Tadao and wife Shizuko had already passed away.

Hiroo smiled and said "those fatigues don't really suit your face" in attempt to shake off the sadness, and Hirota laughed and said, "Oh, they don't suit me, eh?" He then commented that "I haven't been allowed to read a newspaper since the sentence was finalized, so I don't know anything about what's been happening," which led the six to engage in small talk. Hirota did his best to prevent the atmosphere from becoming tense.

As Hirota kept up a happy demeanor and did not anything suiting a final meeting, his children kept the farewells they had prepared tucked away. He was, however, very concerned about the time and repeatedly asked how much was left, which caused his five children to have to hold back tears. The meeting came to an end all too soon.

When it came to a close, Hirota pressed his face up against the bars and said, “All of you, let me get a good look at your faces.” He then added in a strained voice, “It’s going to start getting cold, so take care of yourselves.” His children were overcome with tears, but Hirota held back his and watched as they left. Feeling their father’s gaze on their backs, his children reluctantly left Sugamo Prison with red eyes.¹⁹

As the day of their execution approached, the seven condemned men were given opportunities to meet with the prison’s chaplain, Hanayama Shinshō. Hanayama had previously given Buddhist sermons to the Class A defendants. Hirota met with him on December 22, the day before his execution.

Hirota was not permitted to read any newspapers, but he was unable to keep the situation in China out of his mind and asked Hanayama about it:

Hi: What have the papers been saying about China?

Ha: The Communists continue to grow in strength. The Yangtze River area is under threat, and it looks like Beijing will be surrendered to them soon.

Hi: So what I was most concerned about is becoming a reality.

Ha: I’ve heard that you were planning to meet with the Soviets before the war ended. I think it would have been better for us if that had gone well.

Hi: That effort began too late. We should have started a little earlier, but the government dragged its feet and...

Hirota was extremely concerned that the Chinese Communist Party would win the Chinese Civil War. He had been focused on Russia and China since the days of his youth, and maintaining Japan’s relations with them should have been his life’s work. Now his life would come to an end as a result of judgment rendered by a panel of justices that included representatives of those countries. He sincerely regretted the fact that not only had he failed to enter into a partnership with China, but also that his attempts with the Soviets to bring an end to the war had begun too late.²⁰

“Sacrifice Their Lives to Preserve Their Virtue”

The executions were finally carried out on December 23, 1948. The seven condemned were separated into two groups and taken to gallows erected in the northwest of Sugamo Prison. The group of Doihara, Matsui, Tōjō, and Mutō arrived at the Buddhist altar in front of the gallows first. Handcuffed and wearing US Army fatigues, the four men made offerings of incense and signed their names. After Hanayama, present as chaplain, finished reading a sutra, the men each drank a glass of wine from the altar.

Someone then said, “Matsui should take the lead as he’s the oldest.” Matsui accordingly led the men in chanting “Long live the Emperor!” three times. They also chanted “Long live the Japanese Empire!” three times.²¹ Reciting the Buddhist invocation of “namu amida butsu,” they then met their end at the gallows.²²

Hirota, Itagaki, and Kimura appeared at the altar next, also in fatigues. After the reading of the sutra, they were permitted to take a glass of wine from the altar. The manner in which they were handcuffed prevented them from raising their arms to

take the wine, however. Seeing this, Hanayama took the glasses and poured the wine down their throats. They were thus able to drink despite their restraints.²³

The three men then performed *mizusakazuki*, a ritual in which they poured each other water. This was a farewell ritual, implying that the participants would not meet again. After the ritual was complete, Hirota nodded to Itagaki and the three men all shouted “Long live the Emperor!” three times.²⁴ Their voices seemed loud enough to shake the walls.²⁵

Again, the handcuffs meant that they were unable to throw their arms up in the air as they shouted. With chant ringing in the air, Hirota, Itagaki, and Kimura made their last words.

Eventually, the men began their grave march to the gallows. Itagaki and Kimura both gestured and muttered as they walked, but Hirota remained silent throughout. He climbed the thirteen steps to the gallows without attempting to speak or allowing any distress to show on his face.

Hirota disappeared with the loud sound of the springing of the trapdoor. It was 12:20 a.m., and he was seventy years old at the time of his death. Tokyo would soon experience its fourth Christmas under military occupation. The bodies of the seven men were placed in coffins that were then lined-up on the window side of the execution grounds.²⁶

These were Hirota’s last words, made immediately before walking to the gallows:

The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete.

This was a quote from the Duke Ling of Wey chapter of *The Analects*, a book he had loved reading since his youth. In these words, Hirota emphasized his desire to do good even if it cost him his life. They were the feelings of a man who did not take the stand at the Tokyo Trials; these words were his farewell to this world.²⁷

But while Hirota had shown some grit when assembling his cabinet in the wake of the February 26 Incident, during his time as prime minister and foreign minister, he generally did not display the attitude of a man willing to risk his life for his beliefs. His words—“sacrifice one’s life to preserve one’s virtue”—seem to reveal feelings of regret at his failure to take bold action despite holding important posts. Even as he reminisced through distant memories, it may be that he had been caught up in thoughts of self-recrimination as he gave his dying words.

The Fate of the “Sino-Japanese Partnership”

Looking back, Hirota’s life was one of paradoxes. He had initially wanted to be an army officer but then chose to become a diplomat so as to use diplomacy rather than military force as a means of carrying out policy. But his diplomacy did not prevent the Second Sino-Japanese War; indeed, he actually used military force as a means through which to strengthen his diplomatic hand toward China.

Another paradox is that it was his insistence on maintaining a distance from the mainstream Shidehara faction in the foreign ministry that allowed him to rise to lead that ministry in the 1930s. But the greatest paradox has to be his relationship with China.

Hirota had dreamed of the Asian mainland since he was a young man; even the name he had adopted—“Kōki”—came from *The Analects*. When he finally fulfilled his dream of entering the foreign ministry, his first post was in China, and as foreign minister he tried to take steps toward a partnership with the country, such as by elevating Japan’s representation in China to the status of embassy. But the implementation of the army’s North China separation strategy marked a downward trend in his diplomacy, and he also attempted to use the army’s efforts as a means of advancing his Three Principles. During his second term as foreign minister, this culminated in the “will not deal with” statement, and the judges at the Tokyo Trials—including one from China—sentenced him to death.

While the “Sino-Japanese partnership” that Hirota had continually held out hope for met a tragic end, that fate cannot be entirely attributed to bad luck on Hirota’s part. There is a tendency in Japan to see Hirota as a tragic prime minister, but he lacked decisiveness while serving in an era that was heading for disaster. He was passive and lacked tenacity even in critical situations. It is less that tragedy befell Hirota and more that the fact that he was allowed to serve as foreign and prime minister helped bring about the tragedy that befell Japan.

It would, of course, be unfair to lay the war entirely at Hirota’s feet, and I feel that execution was too severe a punishment. But I cannot help but feel that, at the very least, he bears some of the responsibility. And it was likely his acute awareness of that fact that caused him to not dare take witness stand.

At the same time, Hirota’s failures point to the fundamental difficulties that such a “Sino-Japanese partnership” would have faced: the general instability of the envisioned partners (the pro-Japanese faction in China) and the presence of deeply rooted suspicion of China in Japan. Under these circumstances, the backlash against any attempt at forming a partnership with China would have overcome the enthusiasm for cooperation.

Changing diplomatic course to something more palatable to Japan’s hardline domestic factions would further weaken the already unstable Chinese pro-Japanese faction. It could rapidly cause Japan’s China policy, nominally intended to bring about a partnership, to become something harsher. This in turn would endanger relations with the West and leave nothing between China and Japan but anger and disillusionment. Pursuing the ideal of a Sino-Japanese partnership could easily lead to this negative chain of events and actually worsen relations between the two countries. This is what the path followed by Hirota suggests. His struggles reveal the dilemma facing any Sino-Japanese partnership.

Hirota’s life came to a close after seventy years. But it may present questions about the nature of political leadership and potential bottlenecks for any Sino-Japanese partnership that should be considered today.

Notes

1. Jōhō Yoshio, ed., *Gunjikyokuchō Mutō Akira Kaisōroku* [Military Affairs Bureau Director Mutō Akira] (Tokyo: Fuyō Shobō, 1981), 458–59.
2. Tōgō Shigenori, *Jidai no Ichimen* [Signs of the Times] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1985), 113.
3. Nitta Michio, ed., *Kyokutō Kokusai Gunji Saiban Sokkiroku* [Stenographic Records of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East] (Tokyo: Yūshōdō Shoten, 1968), 10:581–835.
4. Nitta 10:611. See also: Kiyose Ichirō, *Hiroku Tōkyō Saiban* [Confidential Record of the Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Chūō Bunko, 1986), 185; *Asahi Shimbun* (November 6, 1946).
5. Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Sugamo Nikki* [Sugamo Diary] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū Shinsha, 1953), 444.
6. Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Zoku Sugamo Nikki* [Sugamo Diary Continued] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū Shinsha, 1953), 8–11.
7. Nitta 10:797.
8. Ibid.
9. Nomura Masao, ed., *Hōsō Fūunroku*, (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1966), 2:367.
10. Nitta 10:806.
11. *Asahi Shimbun* (November 13, 1948).
12. *Yomiuri Shimbun* (November 5, 13, 1948).
13. Mei Ruao, *Dongjin Dashenpan—Yuandong Guoji Junshi Fating Zhongguo Faguan Mei Ruao Riji* [The Tokyo Trials—The Diary of Mei Ruao, Chinese Justice on the International Military Tribunal for the Far East] (Nanchang: Jiangxi Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005), 127–28; Mei Ruao, *Yuandong Guoji Junshi Fating* [International Military Tribunal for the Far East] (Beijing: Falu Chubanshe, 2005), 166–67, 174–75.
14. B.V.A. Röling, A. Cassese, *Rērinku Hanji no Tōkyō Saiban—Rekishiteki Shōgen to Tenbō* [Justice Röling’s Tokyo Trials—Historical Testimony and Perspective], trans. Kosuge Nobuko (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1996), 10, 104–06, 122.
15. Bernard Röling, “Yuitsu no Bunkan Shikei Hikoku Hirota Kōki o Saishin suru” [Retrying Hirota Kōki, the Lone Non-Military Defendant to be Sentenced to Death], *Chūō Kōron* (July 1983), 153.
16. Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shū Kankōkai, ed., *Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shu* [The Diary of Amō Eiji and Other Collected Materials] (Tokyo: Amō Eiji Nikki/Shiryō-shū Kankōkai, 1984), 656.
17. Hōjō 491.
18. Ōtsuka Satoru, ed., *Shūyūkan Monogatari* [Tales of the Shūyūkan] (Fukuoka: Shūyū Tsūshin, 1962), 73. See also: Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 535–36.
19. Mainichi Shimbun Seijibu, ed., *Shimbun Shiryō ni Miru Tōkyō Saiban B/C-Kyū Saiban* [The Tokyo Trials and Class B and C Trials as Seen in Newspaper Materials] (Tokyo: Gendai Shiryō Shuppan, 2000), 1:358.
20. Hanayama Shinshō, *Heiwa no Hakken* [Discovering Peace] (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1949), 276.
21. Hanayama Shinshō, “Kōshudai-jō no Hōetsu” [Exultation on the Gallows], *Sekai Bukyō* 4:2 (1948), 13.
22. Hanayama, *Heiwa no Hakken*, 331.
23. Ibid., 312.
24. Hanayama, “Kōshudai-jō no Hōetsu”, 14.
25. Hanayama, *Heiwa no Hakken*, 312.
26. Hanayama, “Kōshudai-jō no Hōetsu”, 14. See also: Hirota Kōki Denki Kōkankai, ed., *Hirota Kōki* (Fukuoka: Ashishobō, 1992), 609.
27. Hanayama Shinshō, Sayama Gakushun, Adachi Honshiki, “Senpansha ni Okeru Shi to Shinkyō o Kataru” [Discussing Death and Belief Among War Criminals], *Chi to Gyō* 4:4 (1949), 9.

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Afterword

Today, nearly eighty years from the execution of seven Class A war criminals (including Hirota Kōki) at the Tokyo Trials, arguments over Japan's prewar foreign policy and how to view our history are being reignited. Some have also argued that those war criminals should be removed from Yasukuni Shrine. There can be no doubt that these arguments will continue; if anything, they are likely to grow increasingly intense.

The most important thing to do to prevent discussions of history from becoming fruitless is to unearth and establish the fundamental facts. And I believe that it can be said that the arguments over Japan's interwar diplomacy and the Tokyo Trials ultimately come down to the question of how Hirota should be evaluated. He served as foreign and prime minister for four and a half years in the 1930s and became the only civilian official to be sentenced to hang as a Class A war criminal at the Tokyo Trials. But while he died a war criminal, what kind of person was he?

It would be no exaggeration to say that Japanese impressions of Hirota have been largely shaped by Shiroyama Saburō's novel *The Setting Sun Burns*. And this novel is frequently listed by influential politicians as being among their favorites. The picture of Hirota painted by Shiroyama is a vivid one, that of a man who, despite having fought against the military, is unexpectedly held responsible for the war and silently accepts being sentenced to death at the Tokyo Trials. This Hirota is also full of humanity and is unparalleled in his love of his family.

The Hirota presented in *The Setting Sun Burns* is truly a "tragic prime minister." Readers are moved by Hirota's virtue and his personal creed of "never acting for your own benefit." It was through reading this book as a student that I first became aware of Hirota. When I first read that book, thirty years ago, it had a strong impression on me. But as I became a historical researcher, I gradually felt an uneasiness toward it, and ultimately my reverence for the book waned.

Truly, the book is a well-constructed historical novel. But it also includes misrepresentations, such as that "Hirota was not a formal member of the Gen'yōsha" or that "Hirota did not intend to say a word" when questioned by the International Prosecution Service. And because Shiroyama did not extensively review key materials like foreign ministry records, he was not able to adequately analyze Hirota's foreign

policy, which features heavily in the book. Above all, I believe that his excessively sympathetic portrayal is divorced from the true image of Hirota.

It may be only natural for the main character in a historical novel to receive a sympathetic portrayal, but that novel has gone on to shape how Japanese view Hirota and, by extension, has affected their historical view of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Tokyo Trials? A more realistic portrayal of Hirota was needed. It was with these thoughts in mind that I became increasingly motivated to write this book.

The majority of academic research on Hirota has adopted the approach of focusing on the Tokyo Trials or his foreign policy, particularly as foreign minister. While academia's assessment of that foreign policy varies, there is a growing consensus that places it within the context of a collaborative diplomacy reminiscent of the 1920s. And it has been through the progress of research into the Tokyo Trials that the earlier mentioned factual errors in *The Setting Sun Burns* have come to light. This book owes much to these scholars, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them. There has been little biographical research on Hirota, however; the course of his life has not been systematically traced. This provided further motivation to take a look at his life.

Put broadly, the interpretation of Hirota put forward by this book is that of a man who, while he had had aspirations toward the Asian mainland since his youth, pursued cooperation with Britain and America until the 1920s. His policy arguments during this period were not decisively different from those offered by others like Shidehara Kijūrō. He developed increasingly Pan-Asianist tendencies following the Manchurian Incident, but his vision for a "Sino-Japanese partnership" was unable to withstand the domestic and international changes of this period, and it grew increasingly unstable until it ultimately collapsed with the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Even in this later period, he did not focus solely on Pan-Asianism, however. Even as he envisioned a regional order focused on Japan, Manchukuo, and China and sought to secure de facto recognition of Manchukuo from the Soviet Union, Germany, and China, he also attempted to improve Japan's relations with Britain and the US. He remained outside of the foreign ministry mainstream throughout his career, and it seems unlikely that he would have become foreign minister if the Manchurian Incident had never happened. His lack of attachment to party politics was another factor that distinguished him from other senior foreign ministry figures.

Hirota was not entirely without human charm, and I have strived to convey a true picture of him in this book. But that has to be distinguished from any appraisal of him as a political actor. As he was a public figure, I have mainly covered the diplomatic aspects of his life, devoting the most attention to the relations with China and Russia that made up his life's work, and minimized his interactions with his family.

But when it came time to sit and write about Hirota, a man whose ultimate fate was the gallows, I would often become melancholic and spend several days unable to write a single sentence. Even so, a picture of Hirota gradually took shape in my mind as I repeatedly engaged in a dialogue with the historical sources: that of a man who, despite his popular portrayal, was actually rather weak in resisting the military, did not have firm control over his subordinates, and tended to be swept away by

populism. This came to the fore in his responses to the Amō Statement, the army's North China separation strategy, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, and the Nanjing Massacre, and even more so with the "shall not deal with" statement. When their county stands at an important crossroads, a diplomat must maintain a distance from the volatility of public opinion and populism. Hirota had expressed an eagerness for a partnership with China, but he tended to lose enthusiasm at critical moments.

In writing this book, I was fortunate to come across the "Defense Materials for Former Prime Minister Hirota Kōki at the Tokyo Trials," which had been preserved by Hirota's lawyer, Hanai Tadashi. These not only contained records of Hirota's own words, but also his back-and-forth discussions with his lawyers. These provided insights into aspects like his relationship with the army and his involvement in the Tripartite Pact, as well as into his doubts at Sugamo Prison and his disagreements with his legal team.

Finally, I would like to thank Takahashi Katsuhiko, Kumamoto Fumio, and Murai Ryōta for their painstaking efforts in looking over my drafts and providing me with guidance based on their wealth of knowledge. I also received valuable historical materials from individuals like Tobe Ryōichi. It was Kimizuka Naotaka who pointed me toward Chūkō Shinsho as a publisher. Shirato Naoto of Chūō Kōron Shinsha guided this book through the several years leading to its publication, providing accurate advice and excellent editing. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to them all.

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