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Florentino Rodao

Japan and the Axis, 1937–8: Recognition of the Franco Regime and Manchukuo

Abstract

After just one year of the Spanish Civil War, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident led to the Sino-Japanese War, both conflicts remaining for two years as daily reminders of the world conflicts of the time. This article attempts to emphasize the importance of the coincidence in time of those conflicts in delimiting each bloc, especially through a decision that was particularly divisive for the Japanese government, such as recognition of Franco's rebel government after the outbreak of the war in China. Efforts by Japanese Foreign Minister Hirota Kōki to avoid a decision that would further Japan's pro-Axis drift show the lines of division in the government. His maneuvers progressively failed, including the November 1937 proposal for negotiations to include the recognition of Manchukuo, accepted first by Franco's Spain, later by Italy and finally by the Germans. The article emphasizes the role of Italy in Asia, the reasons for Spanish actions, and the aims of other key persons in this period, such as Prime Minister Konoë, the postwar leader Yoshida Shigeru, or Ishihara Kanji, the officer who masterminded the 1931 invasion of Manchuria.

Keywords: Anti-Comintern Pact, Axis countries, diplomacy, fascism, Sino-Japanese War, Spanish Civil War

Japan's invasion of China in 1937, like the invasion of Ethiopia two years earlier and the ongoing civil war in Spain, quickly provoked a response from the major powers. It also created special problems for the principal European dictators. Germany and Italy had taken a clear position on behalf of intervention in Spain, but initially continued good relations with the governments of both China and Japan, whereas the Soviet Union, which was intervening on the opposite side in Spain, was also an East Asian power and faced the question of equivalent

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intervention in China against the Japanese invasion. When Franco's new Spanish Nationalist regime later requested recognition from Japan, its initiative both pointed up the potential contradictions in the East Asian policies of Berlin and Rome and posed a new quandary for Tokyo. For the latter, this also involved the lingering problem of the international recognition of Japan's puppet state of Manchukuo, so far recognized only by El Salvador, the Vatican and Japan itself. The way in which these dilemmas were resolved would play a role in the eventual alignment of Germany, Italy, and Japan.

The twin issues of the recognition of Manchukuo and the mutual interaction of the contemporary struggles in China and Spain have largely been overlooked by historians, who tend to focus on the direct relations of the great powers. Italian policy in East Asia has been generally ignored, and along with it the limited impact of the Spanish war in that region, together with Franco's request for recognition by Japan and Germany's eventual abandonment of the Chinese Nationalist regime.¹

The Japanese government followed the war in Spain with some interest, though it was a very secondary issue. Relations with the Spanish Republic had generally been poor, since the latter's representative in Geneva, Salvador de Madariaga, had led the struggle for sanctions by the League in condemnation of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, to the extent of earning the nickname 'Don Quijote of Manchuria'. Subsequently, the victories of the new Popular Fronts in Spain and France had raised the specter of a possible popular front in China, as well, which would unite major forces against the Japanese. In 1936, the military insurrection in Spain took place in the immediate aftermath of the abortive Japanese military coup of February 1936, raising a certain note of apprehension in Tokyo. Japan at first simply tried to gather information about the situation in the Iberian peninsula. An American diplomat judged the attitude of the Japanese press to the Spanish conflict as 'studiously neutral in tone'. When the magazine *Kaizō* ('Reconstruction') organized a debate about the issue, most participants analyzed the limited data available and tended to focus on Great Britain's concern to maintain control of Gibraltar, which was frequently the only name to appear on Japanese maps of Europe covering the Iberian peninsula. The only participant to offer a personal opinion sided with the Republican government, on the grounds of its legitimacy, and speculated about the difficulties for the British empire if the 'revolutionaries' (in this case

1 As for neglecting the dynamics of the coincidence of the two wars, see Ernst L. Presseisen, *Germany and Japan: A Study in Totalitarian Diplomacy* (The Hague 1958), esp. 184–5. Herbert Bix, in his *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York 2000) mentions only the Spanish-American War of 1898. On Spain, see Paul Preston, *Franco. A Biography* (London 1993); and, specifically on the foreign policy during the Spanish War, Angel Viñas' latest, detailed books *La soledad de la República* (Barcelona 2006); and *El escudo de la República* (Barcelona 2007); and Enrique Moradiellos, *El reñidero de Europa. Las dimensiones internacionales de la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona 2001). Opening the idea of an independent fascist policy to Germany, at least until 1939, is Valdo Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana, 1935–1945* (Milano 1983).

referring not to the leftist revolutionaries but to the counter-revolutionary rebels) won.²

The increasing internationalization of the Spanish war was helpful to Japanese policy in several ways: it focused attention on Western Europe, diverted potential arms exports from China, and diverted British attention from Asia. Similarly, Soviet involvement in Spain, combined with the effort to come to terms with France, also diverted Soviet attention from Asia. Within the Japanese government, however, various ministries revealed somewhat divergent interests.³

For the Japanese foreign ministry, the Spanish war long remained remote, the only pressing problem at first being the fact that the head of the Spanish legation in Tokyo, Santiago Méndez de Vigo, swore allegiance to the insurgent cause, raising problems of protocol. ‘What should be done with Méndez de Vigo if a garden-party is organized?’ mused a French diplomat in Tokyo. The possibility of Japanese recognition of Franco was raised, however, by Tokyo’s signature of Hitler’s Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1936. At that time Foreign Minister Arita Hachirō (following Japanese usage, the family name comes first) informed the Privy Council that the Spanish war provided further evidence of the Soviet Union’s efforts to subvert other countries, but the Japanese government nonetheless did not seriously consider recognition of Franco, and the foreign ministry limited its response to canvassing other governments about their own views.⁴

The interest of Japanese army leaders in Spain was more noteworthy. The semi-autonomous Kwantung Army in Manchukuo, facing the Soviet Union, was concerned to collect information, especially after the extent of Soviet intervention became clear. The embassy in Paris dispatched Captain Nishiura Susumu, ostensibly to learn about German tactics, but in fact he concentrated on studying Soviet and anti-Soviet weapons, visiting several fronts with a particular interest in gathering data on the T-26 tank, the basic Red Army tank

2 ‘Quijote’: Francisco Quintana, *España en Europa, 1931–1936* (Oviedo 1993), 58–77; Ian Nish, *Japan’s struggle with Internationalism. Japan, China and the League of Nations, 1931–3* (London and New York 1993), 189–93. On the possibility of a Popular Front in China, see Jose E. Borao, *España y China, 1927–1967* (Taipei 1994), 62–4; and Ferretti, *Il Giappone*, op. cit., 137. ‘Neutral’: Dickover to Hull, Tokyo, 16 September 1936, Confidential US Diplomatic Records [hereafter ‘CUSDR’] 3, B (1836–1941). Reel 2. Microfilm. *Kaizō* discussion, held on 4 September, ‘Supein kakumei o megurite’, 11 (October 1936), 74–97, esp. 78–9.

3 Fukasawa Yasuhiro: ‘Supein naisen to nitchū sensō. Nissei-gaimusho monjo wo chushin ni’ [The Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War. Focused on the documents of the Japanese and Spanish Foreign Ministry Archives], in *Rekishi Hyōron* [Historical Review], Monographic issue: 50th anniversary of the Sino-Japanese War, 44(7) (July 1987), 42–3.

4 ‘Garden-party’: Albert Kammerer to Foreign Affairs Minister, Tokyo, 4 September 1936: Japon 122. Asia 1930–40. Archive du Ministère Français des Affaires Étrangères; also, Dickover to Hull, Tokyo, 16 September 1936: CUSDR, Reel 2. The consultations with the Foreign Office, part of them between Ambassador Yoshida Shigeru and sub-secretary of British Foreign Office; see Robert Vansittart, Report by G. Mounsey (Western Dept.), London, 18 September 1936; Public Record Office, Foreign Office, group 371, W16470/62/41.

(some of which were also being sent to China), and also of the improvised anti-tank device created by the Spanish Nationalists, which, several years later, after the Finnish war, would become internationally known as the 'Molotov cocktail'. A second mission by two Japanese officers assigned to the embassy in Rome also visited Spain and focused on Soviet weapons, but went well beyond their mission by expressing their support for the Nationalists and their hope that Japan would soon recognize the Franco government.⁵

These divergent attitudes reflected differences within the Japanese government and underlined the weak position of the foreign ministry. The 'Shidehara policy', which emphasized cooperation with western powers and conciliation with China, was increasingly challenged by the military. The perennial criticism of the foreign ministry as representative of the 'old politics' became stronger after the Japanese military successes in Manchuria after September 1931. Diplomats were accused of undermining Japan's true interests; of being reluctant to cooperate with other institutions; of returning from long stays abroad as semi-foreigners; and, finally, of not focusing on China, the key strategic zone. Criticism mounted further after the ministry's chief spokesman, Shiratori Toshio, spoke publicly in favor of military attacks in Manchuria, opposing the official stance of his ministry. As a result, the government began to give some international tasks to other ministries, while independent offices outside the foreign ministry were set up in China and elsewhere. By the time the war broke out in Spain, military initiatives had begun to infringe more and more on Japanese diplomacy, leading amongst other things to the signing of Hitler's Anti-Comintern Pact, as well as to the independent military missions to Spain. Such interests also promoted the visit to Germany in September 1936 of Prince Chichibu, younger brother of Emperor Hirohito.⁶

During 1937, however, a new government headed by General Hayashi Senjūrō seemed to pull back from closer relations with Germany and steered policy toward the Spanish war firmly into line with the objectives of the Non-Intervention Committee of the League of Nations. Moreover, in March 1937 a sometime language instructor in Osaka, José Luis Alvarez Taladriz, was appointed by the Spanish Republican government as a new Chargé d'Affaires

5 Nishiura himself wrote about his experience, although briefly: Nishiura Susumu, *Shōwasensōshi no shōgen*. [Oral evidence of the Shōwa Era Wars] (Tokyo 1980), 64–6. See also Yano to Arita, Saint Jean de Luz, 26/II/1937, and Lisbon, 21 January 1937, Gaimushō-gaikōshirōgōkan. Nairan Kankei. Archives of the Foreign Ministry. Relative to internal conflicts. Tokyo. On the visit from Rome, Ibid: Manuscript Note n.d., n.p. García Conde to Sangróniz, head of the Diplomatic Cabinet, Rome, 9 December 1936. Archives of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Renovated Section [hereafter 'AMAE-R'] Legajo 1466, expediente 14 [hereafter 1466–14]. Aims as expressed to the representative in Rome, Conde to Sangróniz (Francoist Secretary for Foreign Relations), Rome, 30 December 1936. For both visits, interview with Harushige Kaneda, then a Japanese student in Salamanca, at the headquarters of the rebel army, Tokyo, 22 December 1991.

6 On problems inside the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Barbara J. Brooks, *Japan's Imperial Diplomacy. Consuls, Treaty Ports and War in China 1895–1938* (Honolulu 2000), 175. On Prince Chichibu's visit, John P. Fox, *Germany and the Far Eastern Crisis 1931–1938: A Study in Diplomacy and Ideology* (Oxford 1982), 248, 384n.

there. This nonetheless failed to solve the issue of protocol in the Spanish legation, because those Spanish diplomats who supported Franco — with the assistance of the Italian embassy — managed to keep Alvarez Taladriz from entering the premises, and the Japanese police refused to interfere. The Spanish Nationalist representatives concentrated their work on the Tokyo legation, closing the consulate general in Kobe (it would not be reopened until the 1990s), keeping their doors locked and removing external signs of identity on their building while patrolling its garden with guard dogs. After two months, however, the Francoist diplomats began to run out of funding and sought to negotiate, demanding payment of 94,000 Yen in accumulated salaries, a guaranteed Japanese government loan and return tickets to Spain.⁷

When the fighting flared in north China in July, the militant Chinese response surprised the Japanese. The Chinese government's abandonment of its long-standing slogan, 'First internal pacification, then external resistance', to concentrate on national resistance rendered obsolete the initial Japanese intention of limiting the zone of conflict to north of the Yellow River.

To Francisco José del Castillo, the only Francoist representative remaining in Tokyo, war in China was a blessing. His relations improved with the formation of the new government led by Konoye Fumimaro and its foreign minister Hirota Kōki, who had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. The conflict in China would soon lead the new government to re-examine its policy toward Spain, its major concern being the reaction of the western powers to the new war in East Asia. The initial responses were not overly hostile to Japan, but Soviet signature of a Non-Aggression Pact with China on 21 August 1937 raised the specter of Soviet intervention. This also evoked for the Japanese government a parallel with the war in Spain, since it blamed both conflicts on the influence of communism. For the first time, the Spanish war began to take on some importance for Tokyo, as Shiozaki Hiroaki asserts.⁸

The situation in Tokyo improved rapidly for Del Castillo, who was successful in obtaining a loan from the Augustinian order in China. He soon received assistance from Eduardo Herrera de la Rosa, a former Spanish military attaché who had remained in Tokyo and who enjoyed numerous contacts. These informed him of the 'renewed interest in the Spanish conflict from the Japanese Army and Navy', as well as among 'young personnel' in the foreign ministry. Herrera was therefore able to help Del Castillo establish links with high officials, as well as to avoid disapproval of Del Castillo's public declaration that the earlier proposal to negotiate with Spanish Republicans had been no more than a delaying tactic. When the Republican chargé Alvarez Taladriz offered him the previously requested amount to hand over the legation compound, Del

7 In the Japanese press, e.g. 'Tokyo ni "Supein nairan" boppatsu' [Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in Tokyo], *Asabi Shimibun*, 14 April 1937. Gómez de Molina to Asís Serrat, Tokyo, 30 April 1937: Archivo General de la Administración [AGA] — Asuntos Exteriores [AE], Box 5177.

8 Shiozaki Hiroaki, 'Furanko seiken no Nichi-Doku-I bōkyō kyōtei' [The Franco Government and the German-Japanese-Italian Anti-Communist Pact], in Saitō Takashi (ed.), *Supein Nairan no Kenkyū* [Studies on the Spanish Civil War] (Tokyo 1979), 263.

Castillo refused, while the foreign ministry declared that it would not require him to do so.⁹

Meanwhile, Franco's representative in Rome, Pedro García Conde, discussed the issue of Japan's recognition of his government with the Japanese ambassador there. When the latter told him that a majority of Japanese now favored this, García Conde asserted inaccurately that he had received instructions to press the matter, a conversation which, combined with the recent agreement between Nanjing and Moscow and the insistence of Giacinto Auriti, the Italian ambassador in Tokyo, had some effect on the Japanese government. Soon afterward, it indicated that the Spanish Nationalists would officially be granted belligerent status, giving them virtual equality with the Republican regime; but Franco's representatives then began to press for full recognition.¹⁰

This was a bold move, for the chances of gaining such favor from the Japanese government were hard to gauge. The demand was supported by most of the small number of Spaniards resident in Japan, most of them members of the Catholic missionary community, many of these being Jesuits in Japan's Pacific islands. In Tokyo, Franco's request would be certain to receive support from the leaders of the army and navy (especially the latter) and from younger diplomats such as Yosano Shigeru, who had been assigned to deal with Del Castillo. Yosano was the son of the fiery poet Yosano Akiko, who decades earlier had written a controversial poem protesting the conscription of her brother for the war with Russia (1904–5). There were also important elements opposing the Spanish demand, such as José Muñoz Peñalver, long-standing professor of Spanish literature at the Tokyo University for Foreign Studies, whose students had formed an alumni association. Del Castillo also identified as opponents several key figures in the emperor's entourage and referred to the fear among some officials that Japan was going too far in aligning itself with Germany and Italy.¹¹

The opinion of Foreign Minister Hirota is the hardest to evaluate. After the Japanese defeat in 1945, the International Military Tribunal would sentence

9 'Renewed': a letter written by Herrera to his brother Juan and sister Esperanza is a very helpful document in tracing the whereabouts of the recognition: Yokohama, 25 November 1937, AMAE-P [Personnel Section], José del Castillo. On the offer for funds: Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 13 August 1937: AMAE-P, José del Castillo; Castillo to Méndez de Vigo, Tokio, 31 July 1937, AGA-AE, 5177.

10 Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 21, 25 August 1937: AMAE-R, 1466–14. Castillo note copied in Conde to Secretario General Jefe Estado, Rome, 25 August 1937, and Conde to Castillo, Rome, 26 August 1937: AMAE-R, 1466–14. Telegrams and correspondence between the Francoist General Headquarters and its representatives in Tokyo during the Spanish Civil War were always through Rome, and copies of that correspondence are found in the files relating to the Embassy in Rome and the representation in Japan, now located in different archives, AMAE-R and AGA-AE. This article refers to the receiver of the messages and to the most useful copy, since Conde in Rome occasionally modified or added text.

11 Castillo a Sangróniz, Tokyo, 2 November 1937: AGA-AE, 5176; Herrera to Juan and Esperanza, Yokohama, 25 November 1937: AMAE-P, José del Castillo. On Muñoz Peñalver, telephone interview with Alvarez Taladriz, 29 October 1990: Ferretti, *Il Giappone*, op. cit., 170.

him to death for actions taken in 1937–8, charging him with ‘overall conspiracy’, ‘failure to prevent atrocities in China’, and with having been ‘derelict in his duty in not insisting before the Cabinet that immediate action be taken to end the atrocities’. Hirota is known to have had close links with the Black Ocean Society, a pioneer ultra-nationalist association, and to have believed strongly in Japan’s need for a ‘special position’ in China. He had earlier headed the foreign ministry from 1933 to 1935, when western nations were warned not to interfere with Japanese policy in China, a declaration considered an East Asian parallel to the Monroe Doctrine. After the abortive military coup of 26 February 1936, Hirota had become prime minister for a year, and during this period had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, returning to government once more in Konoye’s cabinet. When he became foreign minister once more, his spokesman gained international attention by declaring that the world was divided between ‘have and have-not nations’. Following Konoye’s recommendation to reform the foreign ministry, he announced that he favored assigning to it new personnel from other ministries. However, Hirota was also concerned to fend off new discussions in the Diet about creating a new China department outside the foreign ministry. His main concern was to retain as much influence as possible over affairs in China and he opposed further links with Berlin and Rome which might interfere with this objective.¹²

Though Konoye personally favored recognition of Franco and enjoyed a long friendship with Herrera de la Rosa, even to the extent of providing him with special items to improve his health during the Pacific war, the prime minister’s contribution to the recognition process was only marginal. He altogether failed to live up to hopes that he would control the military, spending his first weeks in office in futile internal disputes, most of which he lost. Military leaders soon ignored him, providing no information about their own plans and boycotting his efforts to mediate with China. Konoye soon acknowledged that ‘I have very little control over things,’ and contributed little to the debate over policy regarding Spain, about which Del Castillo was able to learn a certain amount through Herrera, who gained information indirectly from Konoye’s wife and from his secretary.¹³

Britain and France retained some influence in Japan’s decision-making. Distrust was reciprocal; the British ambassador, Robert Craigie, reported an

12 On Konoye’s and Hirota’s reform ideas, see Brooks, *Imperial Diplomacy*, op. cit., 169, 181, 196. On Hirota’s links, see Usui Katsumi, ‘The Role of the Foreign Ministry’, in Dorothy Borg and Shumpei Okamoto (eds), *Pearl Harbor as History. Japanese-American Relations 1931–1941* (New York 1973), 132. On Hirota’s condemnation, see B.V.A. Röling and C.F. Ruter, *The Tokyo Judgement: The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE), 29 April 1946–12 November 1948* (Amsterdam 1977), vol. I, 446–8, cited in John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat. Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York 1999), 459, 628n.

13 On Konoye and the military, see Yagami Kazuo, *Konoe Fumimaro and the Failure of Peace in Japan 1937–1941* (Jefferson, NC, and London 2006), 48–9; Oka Yoshitake, *Konoe Fumimaro. A Political Biography* (Tokyo 1983), 64–5; ‘little control’: *ibid.*, 70. Bradford A. Lee defends his political skill: *Britain and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1939: A Study in the Dilemmas of British Decline* (Stanford, CA, 1973), 99.

atmosphere of ‘mutual antipathy’ between London and Tokyo, and the new Japanese ambassador to Paris, for example, reported in November 1937 that ‘Britain, while posing as a neutral, was aiding Chinese resistance.’ But the Japanese government was concerned to avoid anything that might worsen relations with the western powers, and in spite of the lack of contacts — Craigie’s first information concerning possible recognition of Franco amounted merely to a press clipping — Hirota wished to do nothing to provoke either London or Paris, and opposed recognizing Franco before the latter did so.¹⁴

On the Spanish issue, the Konoye government valued the opinion of Berlin most of all, while the latter sought to maintain an equilibrium between its interests in China and Japan. At the time when the war began, Germany was the main supplier of arms and military advisers to China, and had minor economic interests in Manchukuo. Hitler’s government proclaimed strict neutrality and imposed similar terms on its press, while downplaying Japanese claims of Soviet responsibility for the new conflict. The possibility of hostilities between Tokyo and Moscow placed an entirely new construction on the Anti-Comintern Pact, as German diplomats noted, one of them later writing, ‘The effect of exerting pressure on Russia, which was certainly welcome with Hitler, was reduced to insignificance by this adventure.’¹⁵

German policy was also subject to internal conflict, since the role of the foreign ministry was increasingly challenged in various ways by the Nazi Party’s *Aussenpolitisches Amt* (Foreign Affairs Office) and its *Auslandsorganisation*, the party organization abroad. For example, the leading nazi diplomat and German ambassador to London, the strongly pro-Japanese Joachim von Ribbentrop, had played a major role in negotiating the Anti-Comintern Pact but remained the *bête noire* of professional diplomats. Policy lines were not clearly defined, but even Nazi Party leaders concerned with foreign affairs were uncertain about the level of the communist threat to China and the long-term consequences of the Japanese military initiative. Given this uncertainty, Berlin initially refused the request of Franco’s representatives that it assist in obtaining formal recognition from Tokyo, though there was some sentiment for providing encouragement. There was certainly no interest in promoting Japanese influence in Spain, which might reduce that of Germany. The German embassy in Tokyo did nothing to expedite Franco’s request for recognition, leading Del Castillo to complain that it ‘lost too much time in consultations and exchanging opinions, and refrained from participating at the most

14 ‘Antipathy’: Antony Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor: Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936–41* (London and New York 1995), 37. ‘Resistance’: SIS-RM#673, Sugimura Yōtarō to Hirota, Paris, 10 November 1937, NARA-RG [Hereafter ‘NARA-RG’]-457, NSA [National Security Agency].

15 Ambassador von Dirksen, 28 August 1937, in Fox, *Germany*, op. cit., 229. On the German response, see Presseisen, *Germany and Japan*, op. cit., 128; Fox, *Germany*, op. cit., 236, 238–41; Tajima Nobuo, ‘The Berlin–Tokyo Axis Reconsidered. From the Anti-Comintern Pact to the Plot to Assassinate Stalin’, in Christian W. Spang and Rolf-Harad Wipich (eds), *Japanese-German Relations 1895–1945. War, Diplomacy and Public Opinion* (London and New York 2006), 168.

appropriate moments'. The only exception was the German military attaché Eugen Ott, who supported the Spanish petition; for Del Castillo, this reportedly stemmed 'purely from personal friendship', but probably it was decided out of political reasoning.¹⁶

The Italian regime had less influence in Tokyo, but did not suffer from internal differences, since it had changed its Asian policy earlier than Germany. In 1931 Mussolini had joined other European spokesmen in denouncing the invasion of Manchuria and, even after his own war in Ethiopia, wrote that the Japanese were a great menace to civilization and the white race. Nonetheless, his policy had begun to change as early as 1934, when relations improved with the exchange of new ambassadors, Giacinto Auriti to Tokyo and Sugimura Yōtarō to Rome. They both worked to convince their governments of the benefits of mutual rapprochement and the benefit to Italy of a pro-Japanese policy in Asia. Italy's invasion of Ethiopia resulted in censure by the League of Nations equivalent to that earlier experienced by Japan, while both powers were increasingly at odds with the British empire. Concern for greater cooperation increased in both Rome and Tokyo, and in November 1936 the latter proposed that Italy reopen its consulate in Mukden, while Japan would downgrade its legation in Addis Ababa to consular status, in recognition of the Italian conquest. Later, in a discussion with Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, Ambassador Sugimura praised Italian intervention in Spain. Soon afterward, when the 'Sian incident' resulted in doubt about the further determination of the Chinese premier Jiang Jieshi to fight the communists, both Tokyo and Rome reacted with alarm. Finally, a minor clash between Japanese and Russian troops along the Amur River in June 1937, only weeks before the Marco Polo Bridge incident, led Ciano to observe to Sugimura that this reminded him of the anti-communist struggle in Spain and was not likely to be speedily resolved.¹⁷

After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Italian policy eventually moved nearer that of Japan. The initial stance was neutrality, because of significant Italian commercial interests and missionary activity in China, as well as the existence of good relations with Nanjing and the role of Italian air force instructors with Chinese forces. To draw Rome closer, the Japanese government publicly proposed that Italy sign the Anti-Comintern Pact, privately suggesting a secret addendum which would combine Italian neutrality in China with greater bilateral military cooperation with Japan. The Italian response

16 'Friendship': Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 21 September 1937, AGA-AE, 5177; Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 15 August 1937, AMAE-P, José del Castillo. 'Lost': Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 5 October 1937, AGA-AE, 5176. Del Castillo tended to highlight his role: for instance, he reported to his superiors that he managed an interview between Herrera and Konoye, which was false. Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 8 September 1937, and Herrera to Castillo, Katase, 25 August 1937, AGA-AE, 5176.

17 Ferretti, *Il Giappone*, op. cit., 41, 121. For the anti-Japanese comments, see D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York 1976), 98; for the British fears, Lee, *Britain*, op. cit., 81–2. Conversation with Sugimura, 18 November 1936, in Malcolm Muggeridge, (ed.), *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* (London 1948), 68–9. 'Amur': Fox, *Germany*, op. cit., 381n.

grew increasingly positive, and on 23 August Ciano noted in his diary that new planes requested by China would not be provided. There was increasing awareness that Soviet concern over China might lead to its disengagement from Spain, as the ambassador in Moscow, Augusto Rosso, reported. Though Ciano continued to maintain talks with the Chinese, Mussolini's policy was changing, as he made the calculation that the Japanese would become one of the four races dominant in the world, the others being the Germans, Italians and Russians. In an article which he published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on 6 October, Mussolini declared that 'Japan is not formally fascist, but she is anti-Bolshevist, and the trend of her policy and her people brings her into the fold of the fascist states.' Further gestures on behalf of Japan followed, and the Italian government lodged no protest when an Italian photographer was killed by Japanese planes in the *Panay* incident of December 1937, Ciano dismissing it in a conversation with the Japanese ambassador as 'normal in the framework of a full-scale war', though he noted in his diary that the latter 'was surprised and touched' by such nonchalance.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Del Castillo, supported by zealous Italian policy, by the spread of the war, and the signing of the new Sino-Soviet Pact, presented his first request for official recognition to the Japanese foreign ministry near the close of August 1937. It referred specifically to the legal difficulties encountered by Spanish residents, most of them aligned with the Nationalists, in Japan. When Del Castillo obtained an interview with Hirota on 31 August, the latter mentioned the possibility of consular agreements, but also expressed fear of possible reprisals against Japanese ships in Spanish Republican waters. Though the cabinet eventually decided in favor of Franco's request, Hirota continued to fear reprisals and postponed any action.¹⁹

Del Castillo then turned to the General Staff, which favored full recognition, while Herrera de la Rosa pressed the issue in an interview with Konoye on 8 September. These moves brought a change in attitude in the foreign ministry, which then became 'outspokenly favorable' to recognition, according to a later report by Del Castillo. This, however, proved an exaggeration, as Del Castillo soon changed his description to one of merely a 'favorable reception' by the foreign ministry and consequently urged his superiors to gain the backing of Berlin. The reason for the change was apparently motivated by disputes within Tokyo. In the weeks that followed, the Spanish representative and the former military attaché referred to conflict in Tokyo between the military and

18 'Nearer', V. Ferretti, 'Italia y el reconocimiento diplomático del gobierno Nacional español por parte de Japón', *Revista Española del Pacífico* 5 (1995), 227; G. Ciano, *Ciano's Diary 1937-38*, trans. Andreas Mayor, introduction by Malcolm Muggeridge (London 1952), entries in the year 1937: 23 August, 3; 30 August, 6; 6 September, 9-10; 15 November, 33. *Il Popolo* (not with Mussolini's name) quoted in Presseisen, *Germany and Japan*, op. cit., 179-80. 'Popularity': Ferretti, *Il Giappone*, op. cit., 144. 'Normal [...] surprised': *Ciano's Diary 1937-38*, 16 December 1937, 44.

19 Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 6 and 7 September 1937, AMAE-R, 1466-14. Castillo telegram previous to the meeting copied in Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 1 September 1939.

younger diplomats on one side and the senior politicians and diplomats on the other, the latter fearing international complications.²⁰

The Italian ambassador tried to assist by requesting his two military attachés to take a hand with the Japanese military, but Berlin was much less helpful. More influential was the effect of the ‘Knatchbull–Hugessen incident’, stemming from a Japanese assault on the car of the British ambassador to China on 26 August, which seriously wounded him even though his car had been clearly marked. Tokyo initially sought to deny responsibility, but after a strongly worded British protest, on 6 September the Japanese government expressed its ‘profound regrets’. It was two weeks later, when the foreign ministry issued a note partially admitting responsibility, that tension started to diminish, although on the 28 September the army leaders set up their own puppet government in Inner Mongolia in spite of the fact that the Japanese war ministry contemplated a negotiated end to the conflict.²¹

Developments elsewhere favored Franco’s suit. In Tokyo, the Republican diplomat Alvarez Taladriz failed completely in his efforts to occupy the grounds of the Spanish embassy, while in Geneva, at the League of Nations, the Spanish Republican foreign minister, Julio Alvarez del Vayo, expressed strong support for China. At that point Franco’s forces completed their conquest of the northern Republican zone in Spain, encouraging the perception that they were likely to gain a complete victory in the civil war. The highest-ranking Japanese official to appear in Spain, the veteran bureaucrat Usami Uzuhiko, then visited Franco’s headquarters in Salamanca and declared support for the struggle against communism and for the recognition of the nationalist regime. After receiving Usami’s report, the Japanese military attaché in Berlin, Ōshima Hiroshi, telegraphed Tokyo urging recognition. Ōshima himself had been briefed by the nationalists, and was soon to be named ambassador in Berlin. The Supreme Imperial Council then approved recognition in a communication to the Japanese cabinet.²²

20 ‘Outspokenly’: telegram before the meeting. Castillo note copied in Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 6 September 1937, AMAE-R. ‘Favorable’, Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 5 October 1937, AGA-AE, 5176; Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 21 September 1937, AMAE-R, 1466–14. In this message Castillo elaborates about those differences, while Herrera simply refers to ‘young personnel’ as his supporters. Herrera to Juan and Esperanza, Yokohama, 25 November 1937, AMAE-P, Del Castillo.

21 On assistance. Del Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 21 September 1937, AGA-AE, 5177; Conde to Castillo, Rome, 4 October 1937, AMAE-R, 1466–14. About the Incident, see Lee, *Britain*, op. cit., 40–3; Shiroyama Saburō, *War Criminal: The Life and Death of Hirota Koki* (Tokyo 1974), 185–7; Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War. A Study of British Foreign Policy in East Asia, 1937–1941* (Oxford 1977), 21–2.

22 On Alvarez-Taladriz in Japan, see also Ishikawa Shōji and Nakamura Hisaki, *Supein shiminsensō to Asia. Harukanaru jiyū to risō no tame ni* [The Spanish Civil War and Asia: International Volunteers for Freedom and Ideas] (Fukuoka 2006), 137–49. ‘Geneva’: Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 5 October 1937, AGA-AE, 5176. On Usami, a small biography in *Nihon Gaikōshi Jiten* (Tokyo 1993), 78; its file in the Francoist Army Archives with a note indicating ‘the original is burnt’. Archivo Histórico Militar. Cuartel General del Generalísimo, 13–74. Ōshima and Wilhelm Canaris, foremost nazi secret agent with Franco, had many contacts, but there is no documentation

The Japanese government's international position then grew even more adversarial vis-à-vis the western powers in November, when it decided to boycott the Brussels conference convened by the League of Nations at the petition of China to investigate Japanese aggression and to seek means of ending it. Tokyo had already withdrawn from the League in 1933 and now severed all remaining links with it.

The Japanese government declared that it would only agree to direct negotiations with China, brokered either by Berlin or by Rome, which would lead to a 'New Order' in East Asia but with a different focus in the region. At the recent Nazi rally in Munich Hitler had stressed the importance of the Spanish conflict as a function of the Anti-Comintern Pact for the defense of world culture, but failed to refer to the war in China. Italy signed the Anti-Comintern Pact on 5 November, an action which, because of the tension between Rome and London, had the effect of turning it in an anti-British direction. The Italian goal was now to maintain areas of tension in both the Mediterranean and East Asia which even the Royal Navy could not possibly cover.²³ The most immediate goal for Japan was expressed by Hirota at the ensuing banquet in Tokyo. He spoke with the German and Italian ambassadors about recognizing Franco, declaring that 'in his view' this should also involve recognition of Manchukuo by the Axis.²⁴

The diplomatic recognition of the Japanese puppet state was totally new. It could be received favorably in Franco's Spain, since the Manchurian issue was perceived as part of the communist vs. anti-communist confrontation. Since 1931, Spanish Republicans had been aware of its damage to the League of Nations, as the role played by Salvador de Madariaga in Geneva showed, while a small booklet on it by the most prominent Trotskyite leader, Andrés Nin, points to its importance in the formulation of communist opinion in Spain. The reaction against this predominant negative perception of Japan explains partly the opposite pro-Japanese view in the pro-Francoist side, and the Falange newspaper *¡Arriba!* portrayed Japanese actions in China as actions against communism even before the outbreak of the Spanish War. The Japanese government, which had opened a new legation in Lisbon, promoted the alternative view through intense propaganda efforts, such as publications or invitations to journalists, and, amidst the radicalized political atmosphere of the war, the pro-Japanese perception was predominant.²⁵

to prove common action in Spain. On proceedings, Herrera to Juan and Esperanza, Yokohama, 25 November 1937, AMAE-P, Del Castillo.

23 Presseissen, *Germany and Japan*, op. cit., 132. 'Conversation with the Duce and Herr Von Ribbentrop', Muggerridge (ed.), 1948, 143.

24 AGA-AE, 5177, Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 23 December 1937.

25 A book by a Japanese liberal internationalist turned pan-Asianist, Zumoto Motosada, *The Origin and History of the Anti-Japanese Movement in China*, was translated, with some additions (thereby appearing as collaborator), by José Muñoz Peñalver as *Contiendas Chino-japonesas: Historia de las operaciones militares en Manchuria y Shanghai en 1931 y 1932, y del movimiento niponófono chino* (Tokyo 1932). In 1936, Gaspar Tato Cummings, a pro-Falange journalist working in *Faro*, a small news agency, was invited to travel to Japan, China and Manchukuo.

In international society, however, Manchukuo remained a pariah, since it was created by Japanese conquest and had previously been acknowledged only by Japan, the Vatican, and El Salvador, whose extreme-right ruler, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, took this step in order to bargain for recognition from Washington, after violently suppressing a peasant rebellion. Since 1934, its government of Changchun (Hsinking) had received no further recognition from foreign powers. Germany had merely signed a commercial agreement in April 1936, while Italy had opened a consulate rather than a formal legation. Then, although Francoists were disposed to contemplate the Japanese adventure in China in a more favorable way, Hirota was proposing a major *quid pro quo*, which hardly facilitated immediate recognition of the Spanish Nationalists.

Del Castillo was immediately informed of Hirota's ploy, and sent word to his superiors by telegram. José Antonio de Sangróniz, the head of Franco's diplomatic cabinet, replied in the affirmative on the following day, so that when the foreign ministry first gave Del Castillo official word of the Hirota proposal on 8 November, the Spanish diplomat was able not only to accept in principle but to present an aide-mémoire that granted him authority to negotiate an agreement. Such an immediate and categorical response perplexed the Japanese, to the extent that their foreign ministry asked Del Castillo to provide official confirmation of such powers.²⁶

Meanwhile, the foreign ministry took soundings concerning the possible effect on Japanese interests in southern Europe and the western hemisphere. Hirota also suggested on 10 November that the recognition should be announced in Berlin, to which a nationalist representative was properly accredited. On 12 November the Japanese cabinet approved recognition for the third time, and this time announced it publicly. Franco's government confirmed the validity of Del Castillo's powers, further reinforced by a statement from Rome by Ciano, as well. Berlin, however, rejected the idea of a joint recognition of the Franco regime and of Manchukuo government that would take place in Berlin, as the German foreign ministry sought to avoid complications with Britain and to pursue peace negotiations in China.²⁷

The Japanese foreign ministry then presented two further complications to Del Castillo. One was a report by its legal department, which concluded that recognition of Franco's regime would be contrary to international law, since that regime did not occupy all Spanish territory. The second raised once more

26 Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 6 November 1937: AMAE-R, 1466–14; Conde to Castillo, Rome, 7 October 1937: AMAE-R, 1466–14. Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 10, 12 November 1937: AMAE-R, 1466–14.

27 'Soundings': SIS-RM#2558, Hirota to Washington Embassy, Tokyo, 10 November 1937, NARA-RG-457, NSA. The Spanish diplomatic records indicate Del Castillo was not informed of the attempt at recognition in Berlin, which he learnt later through Italy. Also, Feretti has not found confirmation in the Italian archives of Auriti's advices to Del Castillo, pointing to the idea of the ambassador's personal initiative: Ferretti, 'Italia', *op. cit.*, 228n, 229. On Ciano's instructions: Conde to Sangróniz, Rome, 14 November 1937, AMAE-R-1466-14.

the issue of Manchukuo, linking it to negotiations with Rome and Berlin. On 12 November Hirota took up the latter issue with Auriti, following which there was a discussion between Ciano and the Japanese ambassador in Rome, and a second talk between Hirota and Auriti. The Japanese also tested German opinion, since in a speech in Munich on 9 November, Hitler had indicated willingness to recognize Manchukuo.²⁸

Then the issue of Manchukuo once more receded and Minister Hirota expressed this in a telegram as: 'After we recognize the said [Franco] government, we will immediately negotiate for Manchukuo to do the same.' On 19 November, Del Castillo and the vice-premier discussed new issues, such as whether the recognition should be associated with previously existing treaties between the two states, a procedure that would gain the emperor's approval, while other ministries were informed of the government's decision, and news of the diplomatic process appeared in the Spanish nationalist press. Del Castillo reported that negotiations regarding Manchukuo should begin as a matter of reciprocity once the Spanish regime had been recognized. Berlin remained opposed to the idea of joint recognition and still expressed hope for a negotiated peace in China that might bring its accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact, together with a Japanese pledge to respect foreign interests in China, while demonstrating skepticism to the Italians. Hitler expressed to the Italian ambassador a willingness to recognize Manchukuo, but did nothing to expedite the issue, while Italian policy preferred to wait for Germany.²⁹

Finally, toward the end of November, Rome decided to recognize Manchukuo. Encouraged by its success in defending Japan's affairs at the Brussels conference, which concluded leaving China isolated and the western democracies voicing weak responses, the Italian government showed more interest in acting on its own. Foreign Minister Ciano's *Diary* shows how this accomplishment had an impact in self-perception. While on 15 November the minister expressed to the Chinese representative, as a hypothesis, that Japan was to overwhelm China, only 12 days later he went one step further and thought how decisive the presumed Japanese victory was to be, wondering whether 'China will soon cease to exist'. The first plan by Spaniards, to make the recognition coincide with the anniversary of the Anti-Comintern Pact, was set aside, acknowledging the German preference not to mix ceremonies, but Ciano privately congratulated himself on the wisdom and effectiveness of Italian policy. Writing in his *Diary* on 27 November, Ciano went as far as considering

28 Note of conversation Castillo-Yosano, 15 November 1937: AGA-AE, 5176; Ferretti, 'Italia', op. cit., 229. Auriti to Ciano, telegram November 1937: ASMAE SP 1-Manchukuo 1934-38, quoted by Ferretti. Interview in *Ciano's Diary 1937-38*, 14 November 1937, 32. On Germany's position: Frank W. Ikle, 'Japan's policies toward Germany', in James W. Morley, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1868-1945: A Research Guide* (New York and London 1974), 313; Auriti's declaration in Ferretti, 'Italia', op. cit., 229-30.

29 'Receded': SIS-RM#1152, Hirota to Consul in Shanghai, Tokyo, 17 November 1937, NARA-RG-457, NSA. News reports in *ABC* (Seville) and *Diario de Burgos*, 21 and 23 September 1937. 'An Outline of the conversation with H.E. Mr. Horinouchi', Tokyo, 17 November 1937: AGA-AE, 5176. *Ciano's Diary 1937-38*, 14 November 1937, 32; Fox, *Germany*, op. cit., 268-9.

Mussolini's 'policy of realism' not only as 'always right' but even as leading to the end of the Sino-Japanese war, where the Japanese triumph was to be beneficial also to the Chinese: 'They are in such distress that they won't be able to react'. The next day, when he reported the recognition to the Japanese ambassador, instead of analyzing his reaction, Ciano envisioned an increase of Italian influence in East Asia: 'We are gaining ground . . . Our conduct at Brussels won the day with Japan.'³⁰

The ensuing acts of recognition proceeded at great speed. The ceremony in Rome to recognize Manchukuo was held on Monday 29 November, followed on successive days first by the ceremony in Tokyo and the official Japanese recognition of the Franco regime on 1 December, and then by the mutual recognition between Manchukuo and the Franco regime on 2 December. The acceleration of negotiations during those final days provoked skepticism in Tokyo, whereas *The Times* speculated that Mussolini's decisiveness was hastened by his signature of the Anti-Comintern Pact and the continuing Japanese military advance in China.³¹

Events at the ceremony in Tokyo for the recognition of the Franco regime proved more problematic than anticipated, for the text read by Hirota on 1 December sought to avoid a clear-cut position on the Spanish war, referring instead to the common struggle against communism, collaboration with Germany and Italy, and the long friendship between Spain and Japan. Since his discourse permitted Japan to limit recognition to mere rights of belligerence, and even possibly to maintain relations with the Republican regime, Del Castillo refused to sign the agreement. The Spanish chargé countered with an imaginative solution, which consisted of adding his own language to the text, affirming that Franco's was the 'sole and legitimate government of Spain'. Since he read this statement to the press after Hirota had already given the latter a copy of his own declaration, Del Castillo assumed that the recognition already held full legal authority, and this was undoubtedly so.³²

The ceremony took place in the Spanish legation, and included a Catholic mass, the raising of the Falangist banner (while approximately simultaneously a Japanese flag was being raised in Salamanca), and speeches by Auriti and Del Castillo, Hirota staying silent. The Falangist Party still had no members in Japan (though Herrera de la Rosa was soon to be appointed its leader), but the act was attended by members of the Italian Fascist Party and the *Hitler Jugend*, as well as by the press. Franco's recognition of Manchukuo was effected in a Japanese government office, not in the embassy of Manchukuo, as the Japanese had proposed. The foreign ministry appointed the diplomat Takaoka Teiichirō, long resident in Spain, as the new representative to Salamanca.

30 On the Italian success at the Brussels Conference, Lee, *Britain*, op. cit., 77, 78; Ferretti, *Il Giappone*, op. cit., 204. Ciano's *Diary 1937–38*, 15, 27–8 November 1937, 33, 38.

31 Ferretti, 'Italia', 230; 'Japan's recognition of Franco: Anti-Comintern Policy', *The Times*, London, 2 December 1937.

32 'Sole', text in Castillo to Sangróniz, Tokyo, 3 December 1937, with the French translation attached: AGA-AE, 5177.

As the military strengthened their hold in Tokyo and continued to advance in China, it became progressively more difficult for Germany to maintain a policy of equidistance. Hitler's own strategy became increasingly aggressive, with his government changes of February 1938, as he expanded his control over the military and appointed the pro-Japanese Ribbentrop foreign minister. Hitler's speech to the Reichstag on 20 February surprised observers because of the attention devoted to East Asia and its strongly pro-Japanese tone. The resulting reorientation of German policy withdrew military advisers from China and canceled further arms shipments, leading to the recognition of Manchukuo on 12 May 1938 and the breaking of relations with China the following month.³³

The coincidence of wars in China and Spain hastened a new international alignment. As Italy pursued its policy of betting completely on Japan's victory, its position was later largely adopted by Germany. Japan's recognition of Franco followed the same logic, reflecting the growing dominance of the military, with the consolidation of its position by the international recognition of Manchukuo. These interests then developed an interlocking momentum of their own, and the army's decision to conquer Nanjing itself came only a day after Italy's recognition of Manchukuo. By late 1937 a series of radical developments in Spain, Italy, Germany, and Japan had converged to reinforce the Japanese military versus the foreign ministry, strengthen somewhat the position of the Franco regime, and decisively alter Italian and German policy in support of Japan.

The real significance of the events narrated in this article can be better understood by tracing the relations between Manchukuo and the Francoists. Bilateral recognition led to closer relations, both regimes announcing the mutual setting up of permanent representation. In October 1938, less than a year later, a Manchukuo Friendship Mission visited Spain, and a Treaty of Friendship and Trade was announced; the next year both regimes joined the Anti-Comintern Pact, and in 1940 a Spanish Economic Mission visited Manchukuo. In addition, new books praising the Japanese puppet state appeared in Spain, written not only by Gaspar Tato Cumming but by another author, Juan Oller Piñol, who visited Manchukuo after having served as deputy of the interior ministry.³⁴

Yet, aside from propaganda and formal declarations, relations between Spain and Manchukuo remained devoid of substance. There were no Catholic missionaries or other Spaniards resident in the area, trade was non-existent, and the initial plan of a permanent delegation was implemented only by Manchukuo, mainly for purposes of military intelligence. The ultimate course

33 Speech to an audience of colonels and generals on 24 January 1938, Berlin, cited in Fox, *Germany*, op. cit., 253. See also *ibid.*, 303–4, 316–17. Also Tajima Nobuo, *Nachizumu gaikō to 'Manshūkoku'* [Nazi Diplomacy and 'Manchukuo'] (Tokyo 1992).

34 Gaspar Tato Cumming, *China, Japón y el conflicto chino-japonés* (San Sebastián 1939); and *El Imperio del Manchukuo* (Madrid-Burgos 1941); Juan Oller Piñol, *Manchukuo antiguo y moderno* (Madrid 1943); *Japón antiguo y moderno* (Madrid 1943). See also F. Rodao, *Franco y el imperio japonés. Imágenes y propaganda en tiempos de guerra* (Barcelona 2002), 165–6.

of relations was determined by factors beyond the reach of Changchun or Salamanca, or sometimes, for that matter, of Rome and Tokyo, as Adolf Hitler demonstrated three months after Spaniards and Chinese joined the Anti-Comintern Pact, when he rendered it useless by a signing a Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union. Relations between Manchukuo and nationalist Spain were largely based on wishful thinking.

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