

## **The Japanese Perspective on Germany's War**

Nobuo Tajima

On December 11, 1941, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed a no-separate-peace agreement in Berlin, promising each other that without full mutual consent they would not draw up cease-fires or make peace with either the United States or Britain<sup>i</sup>. This agreement was intended to link them in a common fate. However, "peace" in this arrangement tacitly meant victorious peace, or at least peace on equal terms, vis-à-vis the United States and Britain. As the strategic counterattack launched by the United States and Britain proved increasingly successful and the defeat of the Axis loomed more certain, these three countries became suspicious of each other's military capabilities and their intentions. This paper will briefly sketch how, from 1943 onward the Japanese government and military assessed the war strength and domestic unity of Germany and how they sought to deal with the situation that developed.

### **Defeat at Stalingrad**

With the defeat of German troops at Stalingrad in early 1943, the strategic advantage Germany had maintained until then collapsed. The Japanese government and military ought to have viewed this German setback as seriously as the withdrawal of their own forces in the wake of the Battle of Guadalcanal that occurred almost at the same time. Japan's grasp of the war situation in Europe at that point was still very optimistic. At Imperial headquarters, Lieutenant General Ichiro Banzai, who had been military attaché to the Japanese Embassy in Germany, had just returned to Japan, and reported that German leaders had "made a mistake in judging the Soviet Union's powers of resistance", but expressed the optimistic view that "developments in that local theater won't affect the entire situation." Hearing this report, Japan's Army General Staff Office expressed the firm belief that "Germany has entered into a long-term state of war, but it will not lose because it has perfected its preparations against all possible odds<sup>ii</sup>."

### **Defeat in the Mediterranean**

The withdrawal in early May 1943 of German and Italian troops from Tunis, a key position in northern Africa, marked the turning point in the Mediterranean front. This development destroyed the optimism that had previously prevailed in Tokyo, and made Japan suspicious of Germany's military capabilities and intentions to continue fighting. On May 13, after discussing the war situation in Europe with Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu, Prime Minister Hideki

Tojo came to the following conclusions. First, the Axis withdrawal from Tunis meant that German-Japanese joint military operations in the Mediterranean and Indian ocean would now be impossible. Tojo said, "We can only conclude that the Eastern and Western fronts (European and Pacific theaters) have become clearly separated." In the hope of bringing a new turn to the situation Tojo went so far as to suggest that "In order to secure a decisive victory on a single front [through Japanese-German joint operations], there is no other way than for Japan to take the initiative in attacking the Soviet Union and crushing its power. With this he posited the adventurist policy of going to war with the Soviet Union in order to unify the Eastern and Western fronts. But Foreign Minister Shigemitsu told him that it would be impossible. "[Japan has] no choice at this time but to maintain absolute tranquility with the Soviet Union. We must avoid provoking it by all means." Despite the foreign minister's admonitions, the crisis in the Mediterranean made Tojo very worried<sup>iii</sup>.

Second, the withdrawal from Tunis affected not only the Mediterranean war front but aroused apprehensions within the Japanese government and military about the prospects of the German war with the United States and Britain and with the Soviet Union. With the Axis defeat in the Mediterranean, Prime Minister Tojo became inclined to think that on the Western front, a "second front in Europe would not be impossible." Regarding the Eastern front, he indicated pessimism about the possibility of war with the Soviet Union, saying, "It is doubtful that Germany's operations in the East will succeed." This conclusion evoked fears among the Japanese leadership that "Germany might collapse in the near future, forcing the [Japanese] empire to defend itself alone in the Far East<sup>iv</sup>."

Third, this perception of the situation compelled Japan to consider the possibility that Germany might make a separate peace with the Allied powers. Bearing in mind Germany's previous actions, such as its independent signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union in 1939 and attacks launched unilaterally on Soviet troops in 1941, Prime Minister Tojo could not erase doubts that "Germany, from the point of view of autonomy, might enter into negotiations with the adversaries about ending their conflicts, with little regard to its relationship with Japan<sup>v</sup>."

Fourth, Tojo decided, "it was justifiable under the circumstances for Japan to exercise autonomy. Specifically, the Japanese considered it wise to immediately set out to improve relations with the Soviet Union." "Japan must not let a favorable opportunity slip by, even if it means sacrificing relations with Germany to some extent<sup>vi</sup>." At this stage, the Germany-Japan-Italy no-separate-peace agreement had already ceased to be binding as far as the Japanese leadership was concerned.

### **Italy's Defeat**

The fall of Benito Mussolini on July 25, 1943 followed by the formation of the Marshall Badoglio cabinet came as a tremendous shock to Japan. First of all, that was an unexpected development of which “there had been no hint whatsoever in the latest reports from Japanese missions overseas.” Japan considered it an extremely serious turn in the course of the world war, and judged that it would have “a tremendous psychological impact because Mussolini and Hitler had generally been viewed as the pillars of the Axis alliance<sup>vii</sup>.”

Second, Mussolini's downfall was enough to give Japanese leaders visions of the imminent collapse of the Hitler regime. Emperor Hirohito, for instance, expressed on August 5 such misgivings to Hajime Sugiyama, former chief of the army general staff: “Should Italy withdraw, then even if German troops maintain northern Italy, the oil fields in Romania would come within the range of Allied bombings. Wouldn't this imperil Germany?<sup>viii</sup>” Earlier, on July 26, Foreign Minister Shigemitsu met with Hirohito. In his accounts Shigemitsu quoted the emperor as saying then, “In case the European situation becomes serious, the greatest care must be taken in dealing with difficult developments and we should be ready for the worst.” Hirohito also said, “With Germany in such a situation, I see no need [for Japan] to be constrained by the German position.” Shigemitsu responded by stating, “If Italy leaves the Axis we do have to determine to carry on the war to a successful goal together with Germany, but of course we must also consider the possibility of Germany abandoning us as well.” As this exchange shows, Japan had to be ready for what the emperor described as “the worst”; that is, ready to continue fighting the Allies completely alone<sup>ix</sup>.

Third, the collapse of the Mussolini regime gave Japanese leaders, albeit indirectly, nightmares of Japan itself being forced into peace. For example, Koichi Kido, lord keeper of the privy seal, remarked to Prime Minister Tojo: Many are worried that Germany might betray Japan, but a more serious problem is what Japan should do if Berlin were to demand, based on the no-separate-peace agreement, that Japan join it in making peace at the same time<sup>x</sup>. Kido predicted the possibility of Germany using the no-separate-peace agreement as an excuse for demanding Japan to make peace with or surrender to the United States and Britain simultaneously.

Fourth, one conclusion the Japanese leadership came to was that in any case better relations with the Soviet Union were necessary. Emperor Hirohito asked Foreign Minister Shigemitsu on July 26; “Isn't it becoming more and more necessary to think of improvement in Russo-Japanese relations?<sup>xi</sup>” Lord keeper of the privy seal Kido, too, told Prime Minister Tojo, “Whatever the case, relations with Russia ought to be quickly improved. We may have to settle the situation in the Pacific with the United States and Britain through the mediation of the Soviet Union. I want this

point to be given special consideration<sup>xii</sup>.”

Italy's surrender on September 8, 1943, though expected by Japanese leaders as seen above, sparked further discouragement and dismay in Japan. “I did expect this sooner or later, but [the news] is certainly disheartening,” wrote Kido<sup>xiii</sup>. Shigemitsu's anguish was intense, “Japanese policy has been manipulated by army's field officers since the Manchurian incident and now we have nothing but contradictions and confusion and it's too late to do anything. Ah!” Shigemitsu vented his anger and dismay on the more than ten years' of arbitrary actions of the military, rather than on the Italian defeat<sup>xiv</sup>. The surrender, however, led Shigemitsu to devise a new, rather eccentric diplomatic strategy. He held out the hope of bringing the war to a successful conclusion by forming a league among Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union premised upon newly divided spheres of rule, sacrificing Italy's demand for its area of influence. On September 20, he made the following suggestion to Heinrich Stahmer, German ambassador to Japan: “Things have become easier for Germany because it no longer has to pay attention to Italy's wishes. So, wouldn't it be all right with Germany to provide the Soviet Union access to the Mediterranean? Promising the Soviet Union access to the Mediterranean and Asia Minor and concluding peace with the Soviet Union would boost German power both militarily and politically<sup>xv</sup>.” However, Hitler's Germany had no room for considering this plan for a “Eurasian continental bloc without Italy” since it viewed war with the Soviet Union as a war of ideological and racial destruction.

#### **The Allied Landing in Northern France and the Attempted Assassination of Hitler**

On June 6, 1944 the Allies landed on the shores of northern France, forming a second front against Germany. The Japanese could not take any action to deal immediately with this new development in the European theater because it coincided with the further deterioration of its control of the Pacific. American troops landed on Saipan on June 15 (leading to the “glorious self-annihilation” (*gyokusai*) of the troops who opted for death rather than surrender there on July 7) and the Japanese navy suffered a crushing blow at the battle off the Marianas on June 19. At a July 11 Cabinet meeting, Foreign Minister Shigemitsu's report consisted only of the reading a telegram from Hiroshi Oshima, ambassador to Germany, which said in effect that Germany, too, was at a critical juncture, although its leadership remained calm<sup>xvi</sup>.

The attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler in Germany on July 20 shook the world. In Japan, however, the turmoil surrounding the fall of the Hideki Tojo Cabinet distracted government leaders' attention, so that they failed to grasp its immediate ramifications. In his July 22 diary entry, Eiji Amou, chief of the Cabinet Information Bureau, simply noted, “An aborted assassination of *Führer* Hitler. It sounds as if Germany's days are numbered.” This was apparently the general

response among Japanese leaders immediately after the incident<sup>xvii</sup>.

At the Imperial conference of August 19, right after the Kuniaki Koiso Cabinet replaced the Tojo Cabinet, it was agreed that it was now necessary to consider a “scenario in which Germany might collapse or make a separate peace<sup>xviii</sup>.” Earlier, from August 9 through 16, the Supreme Council for the Conduct of War convened in Tokyo, which produced a report entitled “Assessment of World Situation.” Analyzing Germany’s domestic situation, the report stated both that “Hitler’s political capability will not be shaken for the time being,” and that “The hardships of the people are severe and the eruption of revolts by military personnel of the former regime, among others, suggest that the solidarity of the German people is not necessarily firm<sup>xix</sup>.” It can be presumed, then, that slowly the repercussions of the July 20 incident were being grasped by Japanese leaders. By then, most of them had virtually given up hope regarding Germany’s internal unity and its capability of carrying on the war.

#### **September 1944 Plan in Case of Drastic Changes in Germany**

To deal with the situation, the Supreme Council for the Conduct of War met on September 21, adopting both “An outline of Domestic Measures in Case of Germany’s Surrender” and “A Plan for Overseas Measures in Case of Drastic Changes in Germany.” Japan mapped out a scenario clearly based on the presumption of “drastic changes” in Germany. Four hypotheses for the direction of German policy were formulated. One option considered likely was that Germany would make contact with Japan concerning peace under the excuse of the no-separate-peace agreement. In this case Japan “will fully ascertain the real intentions of Germany and then try as hard as possible to achieve a compromise between Germany and the Soviet Union and persuade Germany to continue the war with the United States and Britain.” Another possibility was that Germany would form a separate peace—that it would surrender—with the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union. In this case Japan “will terminate all forms of war cooperation with Germany.” A third hypothetical case was that Germany would make a separate peace with the United States and Britain and keep on fighting the Soviet army. If this turned out to be true, Japan would “strive to make the Soviet Union cooperate willingly with Tokyo, and if possible, conclude a Russo-Japanese alliance against the United States and Britain.” Fourth was the possibility that peace might be concluded between Germany and the Soviet Union. What Japan would do in this case was to “seek even closer cooperation with Berlin, and at the same time, persuade the Soviet Union to willingly cooperate with Japan, if possible, forming a Japanese-German-Soviet alliance against the United States and Britain<sup>xx</sup>.”

Of the four cases, the third and fourth deserve special attention. In other words, Japan

included in its possible choices an alliance with Germany and the Soviet Union, or even a Russo-Japanese alliance, in order to carry on the struggle against the United States and Britain. However, in the world affairs of that time, there was no realistic basis whatsoever upon which such dreams might have been fulfilled.

#### **April 1945 Plan in Case of German Surrender**

On April 23, 1945, Heinrich Himmler offered to arrange an independent surrender with the United States and Britain. The Karl Dönitz administration formed in the wake of Hitler's suicide on April 30 stressed its intention to continue war with the Soviet Union, tacitly premised upon German surrender to the United States and Britain. This development was considered in the third hypothesis by Japan's Supreme Council for the Conduct of War about half a year earlier. Japan, therefore, might have pursued the possibility of a Russo-Japanese alliance against the United States and Britain, but the Japanese leadership could not but realize that this was not then a feasible option. For example, the "Assessment of World Conditions" formulated by the Imperial army on April 25 states, "There is a possibility that, with changes in the European war, the United States and Britain might gradually distance themselves from the Soviet Union, but we cannot expect this to have much immediate effect upon the East Asian situation." The army confirmed the impossibility of improving Russo-Japanese relations<sup>xxi</sup>.

Five days later, on April 30, the Supreme Council for the Conduct of War met in Tokyo and produced the "Outline of Measures in Case of German Surrender." Unlike the policy adopted a half year before which merely envisioned "drastic changes in Germany," this new prospectus clearly took Germany's surrender for granted, and the outline itself was therefore quite brief and simple. For example, it states, "[Japan] should take heed not to blame Germany for its breach of the Tripartite Pact, but praise the German government and people alike for their struggle to the bitter end. Care must be taken not to provoke the Soviet Union." As for specific measures vis-à-vis Germany, only the annulment of pacts such as the Anti-Comintern Pact and the Tripartite Pact was planned. The main purpose of the Outline was rather to expeditiously ease domestic unrest, as indicated by the following passage: "When Germany surrenders, measures should be taken to control what domestic unrest it may cause in Japan, and at the same time, infuse the population with a fresh determination to carry on the war to a successful finish and buttress their belief in victory by striving for an iron solidarity in defense of the Imperial land<sup>xxii</sup>."

In the face of the almost certain defeat of Germany, Japan's last hope politically and diplomatically was its neighbor and neutral country, the Soviet Union. However, on April 5, 1945,

the Soviet Union declared its abrogation of the Russo-Japanese neutrality pact, and on April 26, information that Soviet troops were being transferred to the East reached the Army General Staff office. That represented clear evidence that the Soviet Union was preparing itself for war with Japan. Despite the tense situation, Lieutenant General Torashiro Kawabe, vice chief of the Army General Staff office, wrote in his diary: “Has Mr. Stalin really made up his mind to enter into war with Japan? I cannot believe that Mr. Stalin should make such a decision. I don't expect him to be friendly to Japan or suspicious of the United States and Britain, but privately I thought that Stalin, a clever and calculating man, would not seek a new war front in East Asia at this point. Is this nothing but wishful thinking on my part?”<sup>xviii</sup> After Germany was defeated on May 7, 1945, Japan's leaders, some of whom, like Kawabe, had a surprisingly unrealistic view of the Soviet Union, pinned its last hope on a forlorn attempt to negotiate with the Soviet Union. All that actually unfolded, however, was the tragic battle on Okinawa, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Soviet entry into war, and ignominious surrender on August 15.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gaimusho (Foreign Ministry of Japan) ed., *Nihon Gaiko nenpyo narabini shuyo bunsho* [Chronicle and Important Documents of Japanese Foreign Policy](2), (Tokyo: 1965), p.574.

<sup>ii</sup> Daihonei Rikugunbu Sensou Sido Han [Imperial Headquarters, Army War Leading Section], Gunjishi Gakkai [Association for Military History] ed., *Kimitsu Senso Nisshi* [Secret War Diary] (2),(Tokyo: 1998), Entry January 21, 1943, p. 336.

<sup>iii</sup> Ito, Takashi, and Watanabe, Yukio eds., *Shigemitsu Mamoru shuki* [Mamoru Shigemitsu Papers](1), (Tokyo: 1986), Entry Mai 16, 1943, pp. 340-43.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> *Kimitsu Senso Nisshi*, (2), Entry July 26, 1943, p. 405.

<sup>viii</sup> Sanada Joichiro nikki [Diary of Joichiro Sanada], Entry August 5, 1943, cited in: Sanbo Honbu [General Staff] ed., *Sugiyama Memo* [Sugiyama Memoranda](2)(Tokyo: 1967), p. 25.

<sup>ix</sup> *Shigemitsu Mamoru shuki*, Entry July 26, 1943, pp. 382-85.

<sup>x</sup> *Kido Koichi Nikki* [Kido Koichi Papers](1), (Tokyo: 1966), Entry July 26, 1943, p. 1043.

<sup>xi</sup> *Shigemitsu mamoru shuki*, Entry July 26, 1943, pp. 382-85.

<sup>xii</sup> *Kido Koichi Nikki* (1), Entry July 26, 1943, p. 1043.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Kido Koichi Nikki* (1), Entry September 9, 1943, p. 1043.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ito, Takashi, and Watanabe, Yukio eds., *Zoku Shigemitsu Mamoru Shuki* [Shigemitsu Mamoru Papers (2)] (Tokyo: 1988), Entry September 9, 1943, pp. 166-67.

<sup>xv</sup> *Zoku Shigemitsu Mamoru shuki*, Entry September 20, p. 174.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Zoku Shigemitsu Mamoru shuki*, Entry July 11, 1944, p. 210.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Amou Eiji nikki shiryō shu* [Diary and Materials of Eiji Amou](4)(Tokyo: 1882), Entry July 22, 1944, p. 210.

<sup>xviii</sup> Sekai josei handan an oyobi senso shido taiko [Assessment of War Situation and an Outline of War Guidance], August 19, 1944, in: Sanbo Honbu [General Staff] ed., *Haisen no kiroku* [Documents on Surrender](Tokyo: 2005), p. 56.

<sup>xix</sup> Sekai josei handan an [A Draft of the Assessment of War Situation], April 25, 1945, in: *Haisen no kiroku*, p. 55.

<sup>xx</sup> Doku kyūhen no baai ni okeru taigai sochi fukuan [A Plan for Overseas Measures in Case of Drastic

---

Change in Germany], *Haisen no kiroku*, p. 184-86.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sekai josei handan [Assessment of War Situation], April 25, 1945, cited in: *Senshi Soshō* Vol. 82 (Tokyo: 1975), p. 188.

<sup>xxii</sup> Doku kuppuku no baai ni okeru sochi taiko [An Outline of Measures in Case of German Surrender], April 30, 1945, *Haisen no kiroku*, p. 244-45.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Kawabe Torashiro nikki [Diary of Torashiro Kawabe], Entry April 16, 1945, cited in *Senshi Soshō* Vol. 81 (Tokyo: 1975), p. 192.