

The Tripartite Pact and the Soviet Union

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Re-examining the possibility of any political and military alliance between the Soviet Union and Germany, Italy and Japan as the countries of the Tripartite Pact this author selected two following points as main issues.

1) Was there any possibility of a political or military cooperation or partnership between the Soviet Union and Germany, Italy and Japan?

2) As a result of the partnership, was there any possibility of concluding an alliance treaty between Japan, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union as a Eurasian continental bloc?

Historically, the Tripartite Pact officially concluded on September 27, 1940, developed from the Anti-Comintern Pact concluded on November 25, 1936 between Nazi Germany and Japan. According to the opinion of Joachim von Ribbentrop (foreign policy advisor of Hitler in those days) who was the main proponent of the original Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 year, this treaty was a broad political alliance opposed to the Soviet Union as a state, communism as an ideology and communist propaganda as international activities. The alliance was open to other countries. Ribbentrop tried to enlist the cooperation of Italy, Poland, Hungary, England and even China, but before 1939 only Rome joined the pact on November 6, 1937. Since November 7, the day after, was the 20th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution, it was a kind of "gift" to Stalin.

However, Hiroshi Oshima (Japanese Military Attaché in Germany, 1934-1938), who was the main Japanese negotiator and Ribbentrop's counterpart, considered the Anti-Comintern Pact as a political alliance against the Soviet Union and regarded it as a treaty of military cooperation, or at least, as a structure to exchange military information about the USSR.

The Soviet government and the Comintern (Third Communist International), being an international tool of Communist propaganda, publicly evaluated and criticized the Anti-Comintern Pact as "the union of aggressors preparing a new war". Not only the Soviet government, but also the leaders of the Bolshevik Party of the Soviet Union including General Secretary Stalin, always accentuated the difference between the Soviet Union as a state and the Comintern as an international structure, but nobody around the world believed these statements. The Anti-Comintern Pact was formally opposed to the ideology and activities of the international ideological alliance, however, its real anti-Soviet aim could not be hidden.

During 1938 - 1939 Nazi Germany tried to enhance the Anti-Comintern Pact into a new political-military alliance but failed in these efforts. Since the subject is well known it is not

necessary to reexamine this process in detail here. The political ideas and activities of Ribbentrop (who was assigned as the Foreign Minister of Germany in February 1938) vigorously became anti-Britain, and he began to consider the conclusion of an alliance which would be necessary to fight England and France. According to the opinion of German historian Wolfgang Michalka, the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 was "anti-communist in form (pro forma antikommunistisch) but anti-British in fact (de facto antibritisch)"¹ and so became the first step in the direction of a Eurasian bloc. In those days, people often jokingly said, that "Someday Stalin may join the Anti-Comintern Pact".

The stance and activities of the first Konoe (June 1937 – January 1939) and Hiranuma (January-August 1939) Cabinets and especially of Foreign Minister Hachiro Arita in 1938-1939 mainly caused the failure of any effort to change the ideological Anti-Comintern Pact into a new political-military alliance. There was almost no hope that Japanese government should take responsibility of any global military alliance: one with European countries was risky, because of anti-British orientation, but Tokyo's concern was in Asia, mainly the swift solution of the Sino-Japanese war. The Japanese government hesitated in participating in any political-military alliance and implemented measures limited to a comprehensive declaration. It was often called the "grey diplomacy" of Arita. This was an alliance where Germany would become a political ally of Japan; however, Japan would take no military responsibility.

Fixating on details, the evening of April 20, 1939 was a turning point. Immediately after Hitler's 50th anniversary birthday party Foreign Minister Ribbentrop met with Japanese Ambassadors Hiroshi Oshima (stationed in Germany) and Toshio Shiratori (stationed in Italy and came from Rome to Berlin). Foreign Minister warned ambassadors, that if the Japanese government would not immediately conclude the political-military alliance with Germany and Italy, Berlin would be forced to take immediate measures to normalize relations with the Soviet Union.

Contrary to Arita, both ambassadors emphasized the importance and necessity to conclude the political-military alliance with Germany and Italy immediately. They actively co-operated with Ribbentrop towards the realization of the alliance. Nazi Foreign Minister's warning was unexpected and sound unbelievable. Ambassador Oshima regarded it as an "ordinary German bluff", but his colleague Shiratori seriously regarded Ribbentrop's words as a warning and asked Oshima to report the matter to Foreign Minister Arita immediately. However, Arita paid almost no

¹ Wolfgang Michalka, Ribbentrop und die deutsche Weltpolitik 1933-1940: Außenpolitische Konzeptionen und Entscheidungsprozesse im Dritten Reich (München, 1980), S.137-138. Quoted; Masaki Miyake, *Yurasia Gaikoushi Kenkyu* (Studies of Eurasian Diplomatic History) (Kawade Shoboshinsha, 2000), p. 48.

attention to this important information².

Looking from Moscow, the failure of Soviet efforts to conclude a political alliance with UK and France was considerably a "minus", but the failure of a new, strengthened anti-Soviet Anti-Comintern Pact was a huge "plus". Then the Russo-German Non-Aggression Pact became the greatest "plus". Hitler and Ribbentrop chose the political and military "axis" with Italy and the political non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union instead of concluding the Tripartite Pact with Japan. For this reason Germany did not support Japan during the Nomonhan Incident in 1939 and its relations with the Soviet Union changed to amicable.

In May 1939, when the Nomonhan Incident broke out, the German-Soviet relations were still tense and Japan continued negotiations with Germany. During this incident the mutual understanding between Germany and the Soviet Union was remarkably developing; however, the mutual understanding between Japan and Germany did not make progress. As a result the Non-aggression Pact, known as Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was concluded between Germany and the Soviet Union on August 23.

This treaty became the first step towards a Eurasian Continental bloc. Germany and the Soviet Union, two most powerful states of the Eurasian Continent, were involved in the intense ideological fight, but it was over when the leaders of the both countries choose another way. So the partnership was created and started to transform in the true alliance. So we can not conclude that the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Axis countries was impossible. On the contrary, it was not only possible, but achieved to some extent.

The conclusion of the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union was a huge shock to Tokyo. Japan felt herself betrayed by the ally (Germany) who concluded a pact with the major enemy (Soviet Union). As a result Foreign Minister Arita broke off negotiations with Germany about any 'strengthening' of the Anti-Comintern Pact. On August 28 the Hiranuma Cabinet resigned saying, "I can not understand the European international affairs".

After the Nomonhan Incident – and because of it – Japanese-Soviet relations improved quickly. In the difficult situation of the country without allies the leaders of Japan understood the necessity to improve relations with the Soviet Union and Germany. From the fall of 1939 up to the summer of 1940 Tokyo actively tried to normalize relations with Moscow, but the Japanese-German relations were stagnant under the Abe (September 1939 – January 1940) and

² Telegram from both Ambassadors: *Gendaishi shiryō* (Modern History Materials) (Vol. 10, Misuzu Shobo, 1963), pp. 257-259. See also: Seizo Arisue, *Arisue Seizo Kaikoroku* (Memoirs of Seizo Arisue) (Fuyo Shobo Shuppan, 1974), pp. 473-479; Minoru Nomura, *Taiheiyo Senso to Nihon Gunbu* (The Pacific War and the Japanese Military) (Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1983), pp. 174-175.

Yonai (January-July 1940) Cabinets. Only after Matsuoka Yosuke was nominated the Foreign Minister in the second Konoe Cabinet in July 1940 the Japanese government resumed negotiations with Berlin and Rome, and declared a policy to establish new friendly relations with the Soviet Union. This is why Matsuoka is often said to be the original protagonist of the Eurasian Continental bloc doctrine. However, the first person who proclaimed and propagated this idea in Japan was not Matsuoka, but Shiratori Toshio.

After the signing of the German-Soviet Non Aggression Pact, Shiratori concluded, that his mission in Europe was over, and resigned from the post of Ambassador to Italy. Just returned home on October 13, 1939 he made the following remarkable statement to a reporter of "Tokyo Asahi Shimbun". "Japan seems to be very indignant towards Germany, who betrayed Japan with the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact; however, it is not fair to blame Germany because there are some circumstances where Japan should sympathize with Germany"³. Probably, Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the turning-point for Shiratori to change in 180 degrees his former anti-Soviet views. According to his opinion, the position of Japan hardly changed even after the conclusion of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the outbreak of war in Europe. Assuming a confrontation between the Japan-Germany-Italy bloc plus the Soviet Union aimed to build a new global order, and the Britain-U.S.-France bloc of 'democratic' nations trying to protect the status quo, it was natural for Japan to enhance cooperation with Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. Especially it was natural, considering anti-Japan stance of Britain and the U.S., who continued to support the Chinese Nationalist Party, and denounced the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Japan and the United States (July 26, 1939).

When the Tripartite Pact was concluded on September 27, 1940, Soviet-German relations may be seen as amicable; however, both countries distrusted each other. The relations between the Soviet Union and Italy worsened due to the 1939/1940 "Winter War" with Finland, but recovered with the help of Germany. The complicated relations between the Soviet Union and Japan also became considerably normal immediately after the Nomonhan Incident. After all, there was a possibility of realizing the Tripartite Pact with the Soviet Union, and political cooperation.

Particularly, Masaki Miyake interestingly discussed the "possibility" issue in history. It is necessary to quote him, even if it is long.

"Such a discussion as mentioned above is nothing other than applying to history the often used formula of "if....then". If an assertion that in history there is no "if" were to be made, there remains no room for further discussion. This way of thinking presupposes a determinism

³ "Tokyo Asahi Shimbun" October 14, 1939.

concerning history. It is natural that the result changes greatly depending on whether the policy maker selects course "a", course "b" or course "c" etc., at a certain point of time in history. Assuming that the policy maker selected at a moment course "a", it is difficult to insist that course "a" was the only inevitable course.

Historians look at a certain event from the position where the results brought by this event have already been defined, so they tend to the opinion that the realized course "a" was the only choice from the beginning. Thinking the about the matter carefully, however, a certain illusion is seen to be functioning here.

If one goes back to the moment when the policy maker selects course "a", the future, i.e., the results produced by this selection can not be seen. As it were, the selection is performed at a complete loss. Historians often forget this. Or, if they have not forgotten, they are not strongly conscious of it.

Regarding the policy maker, it is troublesome if the policy maker actually performs the selection at a complete loss. If course "a" is called alternative "a", the policy maker is requested to ascertain what result will be produced if alternative "a" is selected, or, what result will be produced if alternative "b" is selected, or "c", "d" or even "e", by finding a way out from a situation of a complete loss.

Since the historians well know the results of the alternative the policy maker selected at that moment, the historians freely criticize the decisions of the policy maker at that moment. This is often called, with some irony, the "hindsight" of historians.

The great policy makers, however, must be able to anticipate the results of the selection of an alternative, which historians well know by "hindsight", when they make the selection. Moreover, in regard to alternative "b", "c", "d", or "e", which are avoided alternatives, the great policy makers must be able to ascertain what results can be produced by choosing these not selected alternatives. It is unforgivable for the policy makers to say that they are really at a complete loss.

If a certain selected alternative including the results produced by this selection is called a scenario, the historians are usually requested to research solely the realized scenario in detail. Historians perform detailed research on why scenario "a" was realized, based on what kind of political, social and economical conditions.

The policy makers, however, must predict accurate scenarios "b", "c", "d" or "e", not only predict accurately the scenario "a". This is because, if this deliberate procedure is omitted, it will not be clarified why the alternative "a" was selected. I believe that the issue of such alternatives

and scenarios are an important issue when considering the history"⁴.

I completely agree with the above opinion of Miyake. It can be said that 'Scenario "a"' was selected as a fact of history, that an alliance between Japan, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union, or the Eurasian Bloc (Continental Bloc) was not realized in 1940-1941. However, it is a mistake that the possibility of realization of such an alliance was not considered as 'Scenario "b"'.

According to the opinion of the present author, there was a possibility of an alliance between Japan, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union during the period from the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact (September 27, 1940) to the outbreak of the German-Soviet war (June 22, 1941). If this possibility existed, historians must research this issue from an academic point of view. Supporters of such an alliance existed in Japan, Germany, Italy and probably the Soviet Union. In order to realize the Tripartite Pact, the participation of the Soviet Union was almost necessary, both geographically and geopolitically.

The turning point in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the Tripartite Pact was the official visit of Viacheslav Molotov to Berlin in November 12-13, 1940. From the view point of the Eurasian Bloc doctrine, the relations of the enhanced Axis powers and the Soviet Union, were the most important matter immediately after the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact. No further description is required here, because Molotov's negotiations with Hitler, Ribbentrop and others about possible cooperation are well known in detail. Molotov's visit to Berlin was the turning point to determine the fate of the Eurasian Bloc project.

According to the German diplomatic sources as well as the Soviet ones, Hitler proposed to Molotov to cooperate directly with the Tripartite Pact and to conclude the Four Powers Treaty. Ribbentrop even drafted a new alliance treaty with supplementary protocols and introduced it to the Soviet guest. Molotov agreed with the protocols in principle by order of Stalin. On November 25 the Soviet Union agreed officially but proposed additional conditions. Stalin waited for a reply from Berlin until the last minute. However, Hitler was basically opposed to any counter proposals, and in December of the same year decided to wage a war against the Soviet Union (Directive "Barbarossa").

After conversations with Molotov, Hitler, unlike his Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, abandoned any ideas of a Four Powers Treaty. At the same time Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka actually believed that a possibility of cooperation still existed, even after his visits to Berlin and Rome in the spring of 1941. Hitler and Ribbentrop clearly told Matsuoka about the

⁴ Masaki Miyake, *Yurasia Gaikoshi Kenkyu* (A Study of Eurasian Diplomatic History)(Tokyo: Kawade-shobo-shinsha, 2000), pp.124-125. English translation authorized by Dr. Miyake.

worsening of the German-Soviet relations and even suggested that a war between them was not beyond the bounds of possibility. It is worth to note, that Nazis did not tell their Japanese ally, that Hitler had already decided for war with the Soviet Union. This was the direct order of Hitler.

Both Matsuoka and Stalin understood that a German-Soviet military-political alliance was no longer possible. For that reason (can it be said even though?) Stalin concluded the Neutrality Pact with Japan on April 14, 1941. In the case of Matsuoka the decision to conclude the Neutrality Pact with the Soviet Union was probably the result of conversations with Hitler and Ribbentrop. This pact became the final step in the history of relationship between the Soviet Union and the Tripartite Pact.

On April 26, 1941, Karl Haushofer stated in the letter to Yoshimichi Kuboi, member of the House of Representatives of the Japanese Diet (and a friend of Matsuoka), who translated his book, *Continental Bloc* (1940) into Japanese, highly evaluated the geopolitical significance of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact as "a masterpiece of politicians with great vision... based on the necessity"⁵. Ironically, this translation was published only in 1943, when the global situation had dramatically changed.

Although such a tendency existed among the political and military elites, and intellectuals in Japan, it is clear that the outbreak of the German-Soviet war on June 22, 1941 defeated any possibility of the Eurasian Bloc. Historian Ernst Presseisen called it the "nadir of practical geopolitics". The global utopia of the Eurasian Bloc including Japan, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union ended in failure. Nevertheless, it is worth to be studied in more detail as an important issue in world history.

A possibility of political cooperation and partnership between the Soviet Union and the Tripartite Pact existed, but the Eurasian Continental Bloc of Four Powers was never achieved. The main cause of its failure was Hitler's stance and actions.

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⁵ Karl Haushofer (Yoshimichi Kuboi (tr.)) *Tairiku seiji to kaiyō seiji* (Continental Policy and Maritime Policy) (Tokyo: Taihōsha, 1943), pp. 1-4.

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