

Italian-Japanese Relations In The 1930s

Valdo Ferretti

Department of Oriental Studies, University of Rome "La Sapienza"

Since the establishment of the kingdom of Italy in 1861, East Asia, and Japan as a consequence, did not represent for a long time a central theme in Italian foreign policy.

Only at a very peripheral level, some initiatives worth attention could be detected before the first world war, while in most cases they concerned only economic or colonial, but secondary, issues. To quote but few instances, commercial relations were minded on the eve of the silk market crisis in Europe in the 1860s and 1870s; some Italian advisers were employed by the Japanese government on eve of the Meiji reforms in very different fields like artillery, oil painting and criminal law; on the eve of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 Italy was asked for help by Tokyo and took a pro-Japanese standing at the moment of the three powers intervention in 1895. Broadly speaking

all that was accompanied also by the idea to try for a concession or a military base in China, which floated among some Italian politicians and diplomats, but lost all of its force at the close of the 19th century.⁽¹⁾

After the first world war all through the 1920s that situation did not substantially change. Formally Italy signed the Nine Powers treaty on China and the Five Powers treaty on the limitations of Naval armaments on the occasion of the Conference of Washington in 1922, thus becoming one of the powers called in a short time to take a stand on the revision of the so-called unequal treaties existing between China and the foreign powers which still enjoyed special rights in her own territory.

If however in the Italian diplomatic tradition the weight of East Asia was secondary, one may note that since the

rise of Fascism a new factor began to play a particular role.

Though up to the mid-1930s such an element did not clearly come to the surface, one may remark that a sort of cleavage gradually took shape in the decision making mechanisms.

Benito Mussolini, who became Prime Minister in 1922 and by 1925 transformed his tenure in a party dictatorship, lacked diplomatic experience and skill, but had absorbed a series of ideas and myths touching on the peoples of Asia and Japan in particular, which were spreading in Europe at the dawn of the last century. The origins of such an attitude may be traced back to the eve of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95 and specially of the Russo-Japanese War. To quote but few examples at that time the socialist newspaper "L'Avanti" had called "a sign of God" the Japanese victories on the battlefields of Manchuria and, at their turn, the nationalist magazine "Il Regno" had published many articles on the conflict in the Far East insisting on what was becoming almost an wearisome repetition. Japan was depicted as a link between the European civilisation and East Asia, between

enlightenment and backwardness. The socialist press stressed the lack of religious feelings among the Japanese populace. At the Conference of the Nationalist Association held in Florence in 1911, the Rising Sun was mentioned as model for the transformation of Italy.⁽²⁾

The intensity of national feelings among the Japanese and the surprising command of modern techniques they showed in the military field, struck Italian observers and later led the future dictator to one of his typical sentences about the new races which were rising. Mussolini had socialist background and looked as if he shared the values of other socialists and "nationalists" who had loudly expressed approval for the small Asian nation, still on the way to modernisation, which had defeated the tsarist empire.

In the beginning of the 1920s, before he took power, Mussolini manifested his sympathy with a Muslim rebellion against the British rule in India and claimed that the "axis of civilisation" was moving toward the Pacific Ocean, openly stressing also that Japan represented the "ferment of all the yellow world". He looked convinced, as other Italian observers were, that the rise of Japan to the status

of world power together with the progress of India toward independence, which went along with the latter's economic growth, were foretelling the decadence of western colonialism and the appearance of new actors on the international scene.⁽³⁾

In this framework during the second half of the 1920s several initiatives were carried out or studied by the Italian government aimed to create bridges toward personalities and groups, specially in India, who were seen as the future rulers of that country, once independence was achieved. Mussolini managed to offer a warm welcome to the poet Rabindrath Tagore, when he visited Italy in 1926 and, on eve of Gandhi's visit to Europe in 1931, he received the Indian revolutionary leader also.⁽⁴⁾

Moreover such policies were basically limited to the cultural field or to goodwill manifestations, as the Italian government intended to avoid negative consequences in its relationships with other powers, which still conserved large colonial empires and interests. As I said the principal area of Italian Foreign Policy in the 1920s lay in Europe, while one of its principal features in that period was the axis with Britain. In the system of the League of Nations, Italy

was a permanent member of the Council and one of the countries most concerned with the maintenance of the world order created through the treaty of Versailles of 1919. I will not enter into details of more general diplomatic history, but I think it is worth stressing that how to deal with some of the questions left behind by the peace treaty of 1919 covered maybe the principal issue of that time, while the rivalries between England and France, though in the frame of the system of Versailles, constituted the principal reference. Matters relating to the Far East appeared largely secondary and, in spite of ideologically related views or speeches of Mussolini, they were not considered of major importance. The only concretely political example of concern for Asia was the establishment of a cultural institution, the Italian Institute for the Middle and the Far East, in 1931.⁽⁵⁾

In short, before the Manchurian Incident the actual line of Italian diplomacy remained the same as in the past decades. As background it is true that Mussolini's perceptions about anti-colonial movements in Asia and potential Japanese threat to the British empire implied a cleavage between more traditional policies and the

dictator's concern. The latter however, as Renzo De Felice remarked, paid but desultory attention to concrete initiatives in the Indian Ocean and in the Far East and even in the 1930s his attention to those regions remained discontinuous.⁽⁶⁾

Such a scenario changed at the beginning of the 1930s. Italian interest in India as a promising market was affected after the world economic depression of 1929. Moreover in 1931 the Manchurian Incident also probably struck the Italian dictator, who was led to realise it as a signal of a Japan led revolt of Asian Countries against western domination. Even if the official line of the Italian government coincided with the League of Nations', Mussolini sensed that Italy, which did not possess true colonies in East Asia, except a small concession in T'ientsin, could exert a mediating function between Japan and other European powers.⁽⁷⁾

At a more concrete level the beginning of the 1930s was marked by attempts to penetrate the Chinese market. The fascist regime was promoting aircraft industry and a mission of advisers, who were employed to train pilots of the young Chinese airforce represented an initiative which

had some success.⁽⁸⁾

As to Japan, before 1935, two attitudes were conflicting with each other. As a consequence of trade attrition following the great depression of 1929, and of commercial policies aiming to protect domestic markets, some troubles were arising. The assistance of Italian advisers to the Chinese nationalist government angered the Japanese and was an object of friction at diplomatic level.⁽⁹⁾ Moreover in 1934 the start of the Ethiopian crisis led a stream of Japanese public opinion (with the backing of some high ranking Gaimushō officials) ⁽¹⁰⁾ to plead loudly for a pro-Ethiopian and consequently anti-Italian action.

In the meantime however, may be following a direct impulse coming from Mussolini himself, the new Italian ambassador to Tokyo, Giacinto Auriti, claimed since 1933 that the threat Japan exerted to British, or more broadly speaking to western colonial interests, might play into Italian hands.⁽¹¹⁾ The dictator himself contributed to playing down frictions with Japan, or limiting them, as happened on the eve of the Amō Incident in 1934.⁽¹²⁾ Thanks to the initiatives of the new ambassador to Rome, Sugimura Yōtarō also, a cultural agreement was signed between both

governments,⁽¹³⁾ while, with a gesture aiming to please Japanese public opinion, Mussolini accepted the postponement to 1944 of the choice of Rome as the seat Olympic games, leaving to Tokyo that for 1940.⁽¹⁴⁾

The years between 1935 and 1940 represented a turning point for Italian foreign policy, though many aspects of that change are still a controversial field for specialised scholars. In 1935 Mussolini decided, after the so-called Incident of Ual-Ual, that Italy had to take the full control of Ethiopia. He however hoped to achieve his purpose through a diplomatic compromise with Britain and France, who had agreement with Italy over the integrity of the Amharic kingdom and reciprocal interests there. Also such a design failed as especially the British government took an opposing attitude, largely under pressure coming from domestic public opinion. When the Italian troops invaded Ethiopia, the British championed intransigent attitude inside the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia was a member, and went so far as to concentrate the home fleet in the Mediterranean Sea. All that undermined the entente established since the 1920s between Italy and Britain, leading Mussolini to smooth his attitude toward Nazi

Germany and to try for new allies on which to rely in his controversy with the League of Nations.

In December 1935 the so-called Hoare-Laval Plan, a secret compromise formula secretly worked out between the Italian government and the English and French Foreign Ministries, ultimately failed. On January 6, 1936, Mussolini led the German ambassador to Rome, von Hassell to understand that he gave up his opposition to German policies in Austria. As the Austrian problem had been up to 1935 the very contended point between both countries, that episode sharply marked a watershed in the history of fascist foreign policy.⁽¹⁵⁾

Right in the very dramatic moments between the fall of 1935 and January 1936, in clearly strategic terms, a political rapprochement to Japan was taken into consideration. Also I would stress that such a change occurred before, not after, the change of attitude to Nazi Germany. As I dealt in length with this problem in an article published in Japan in 1987, I will prefer just to abridge its contents now. In September 1935 the embassy in Tokyo informed Rome that the Japanese Navy was looking with interest to the resistance of the Italians to the pressure exerted on them

by the British Empire over the Ethiopian affair. Right on that occasion Mussolini instructed the Italian Naval Attache to Tokyo, Alberto Ghe, to sound out the Imperial Japanese Navy about "possible ententes" which might fix an "even modest rate" of British Naval forces in the Far East, claiming also that he was willing to achieve a military agreement with Japan in future. Later in October the Italian ambassador in the United Kingdom, Dino Grandi, during the Second London Naval Conference on Naval Limitations, suggested to Rome not to oppose Japanese requests and claimed that if Japan could obtain a better position on the naval disarmament issue, that could play into Italian hands and lead England to take a less rigid stand over the Ethiopian question.⁽¹⁶⁾ A detail made more interesting by the fact that Grandi was a close adviser of the Duce, but never became a partisan of a pro-German course of Italian foreign policy. Mussolini approved his advice, though by then, in technical terms, the position of Rome on the disarmament issue was slightly different from Japan's.

In other words the contrasts matured with the British by the close of 1935 led the Government of Rome to

consider that a military entente with Japan, or even only a deterrent function exerted by the Japanese navy against English defences in East Asia, would suit the overall strategy of Rome in Europe. From that moment onwards, additional factors intervened fueling rapprochement between both countries, as Japan, which was in need of protecting her own commercial interests, recognised the Italian annexation of Ethiopia in 1936, while relations between Rome and the Chinese National government were put under stress because of the support given by Nanjing to the approval of economic sanctions against Italy by the league of Nations in October 1935.

To some extent the similar position of both countries face the League and the hatred of Mussolini to the latter, like the tutelage of Italian interests in Manchuria even after the sanctions were suspended in June 1936, the start of Civil War in Spain, Italian intervention there and growing frictions between Italy and the Soviet Union, both in Europe and in China, contributed to make tenser the relationships between Japan and Italy.⁽¹⁷⁾

The story of how all that led Italy in 1937 to join the Antikomintern Pact, which had been signed one year

before between Germany and Japan, is well known, though there are some still obscure details over its background. The exact terms of the debate also inside the Japanese Government and in the Japanese Army and Navy for the loss of many documents can be only partly reconstructed. Which role was played by the Germans and by the Japanese embassy in Berlin remains also a mystery. As to the neutrality and consultation agreement discussed at bilateral level between Ciano and the Japanese ambassador to Rome Hotta Masaaki, however, we have some more direct sources. They include a letter of Ciano to Grandi, which gives the nutshell, even more that the diary of the Italian foreign Minister himself, of the significance that he and Mussolini attached to the properly political side of the ongoing agreement with Japan. Actually the focus of both Italian leaders' toward Japan looked pointed to a strategic view, focusing on the British Empire. With Britain Italy was bordering war once more as a consequence of the Spanish crisis, a danger not still entirely vanished, as Ciano's letter said, at the time of his talks with Hotta.

The negotiations for a bilateral pact of neutrality conducted in July and in August 1937, and dropped later

because of the opposition of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, have been the object of detailed research as well. I would stress only the more general meaning of such developments.⁽¹⁸⁾

Following at least in part one line of interpretations still criticised by some historians,⁽¹⁹⁾ I would point out that between 1937 and 1938 Mussolini tended to make use of Germany and Japan in the framework of a sophisticated design. On the one hand he intended to obtain from Britain and France a larger sphere of influence in the Mediterranean, thus putting an end to the caution also which had impeded his sympathy towards the revolutionary movements in Asia and Japanese advance in China ten years before. On the other hand, however, he was fearful that a German mastery could take shape in Europe. His ultimate purpose was to reach a settlement with Britain, which, once reached, was intended to check the spread of German power. The threat exerted by Japan on British positions in East Asia looked like a factor to turn to account in order to lead London to give in and to submit to Mussolini's plans. Such background explains also many initiatives at the cultural and propaganda level, which were

taken between 1937 and 1939, in order to emphasize the similarity between fascism in Italy and the Japanese regime and to stress the achievements of both countries.

The output of all these premises ripened between 1938 and 1939. In the Autumn of 1938 the conference of Munich brought about a compromise on the Chekoslovakian issue between Nazi Germany and the democratic powers, which largely reflected a scheme worked out by Dino Grandi, still the ambassador to London, and later endorsed by Mussolini, who succeeded in placing Italy, as he wished, in a mediating position.⁽²⁰⁾ It is interesting to remark that on October 10th the negotiations of a collaboration agreement with the Japanese Navy started also,⁽²¹⁾ which however excluded any clause of automatic resort to war, just while in the same months the Italian dictator showed his allergy to an alliance with Germany (at that time under discussion since the preceding July) if it had to include the same kind of war clause. Hence we may conclude that in his eyes the entente with Japan was designed to make easier for Italy to obtain better conditions and geopolitical concessions from England and France, but not to support the scheme of a power bloc led by Germany. In the end the "entente"

with Tokyo was suiting his benevolence to Asiatic nationalism and anti-western regimes, but all that had to square concretely with the final objective to enlarge Italian influence in Europe, in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East, while checking the growing power of Hitler through a settlement with England.

There is not time to examine why Mussolini accepted instead the German schemes of alliance in January 1939 and ultimately made the Steel Pact in May 1939. Recent researches have put new questions and added evidence on these points, but it should be in any case remembered that after the beginning of war in Europe in September 1939 Italy remained neutral and parallelism with Japan stimulated an initiative from the Japanese government on the eve of the Satō Naotake mission to Rome in June 1940.⁽²²⁾

To sum up, the 1930s were the only period in Italian diplomatic history when Japan assumed a role in power politics, by reaching the perimeter of primary Italian interests.

Although the dynamics of such policies continued in the war years, after the Tripartite Alliance of 1940 the

dimension of the Italian-Japanese link was modified. The very point for the Italian dictator was not any more to balance between Britain and Germany, but to keep his freedom of movement inside the Tripartite Alliance ⁽²³⁾ and specially to face Germany. In that framework the role attached to Japan had to change also. That however, could be the subject of another talk.

- (1) For more detailed references and bibliography, cf. V.Ferretti, *Images and Memory : relations between Japan and Italy from 1853 to 1918*, forthcoming.
- (2) Cf. V.Ferretti, *L'Immagine del Giappone nella stampa e nelle rivista nazionaliste dei primi anni del Novecento*, forthcoming.
- (3) R.De Felice, *Mussolini l'Alleato. L'Italia in Guerra 1940-1943*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, p.481.
- (4) Cf. V.Ferretti, "L'India, Gandhi e il Fascismo," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, vol.LXII, f.I-IV, 1988, pp.109-118.
- (5) V.Ferretti, "Politica e Cultura: Origini e Attività dell'Ismeo Durante il Regime Fascista," *storia contemporanea*, 1986, n.5, pp.779-819.
- (6) R.De Felice, *Il Fascismo e l'Oriente*, Bologna, il Mulino,

Bologna, 1988, pp.10-1.

- (7) See his leading article "Estremo Oriente" in, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 18/8/1934.
- (8) See, G.Borsa, "Tentativi di Penetrazione dell'Italia Fascista in Cina," *Il Politico*, 1979, n.3, pp.381-419.
- (9) V.Ferretti, *Il Giappone E La Politica Estera Italiana 1935-41*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1995, p.25.
- (10) 田浦正徳「伊エ紛争と日本側の対応—昭和十年杉村声明事件を中心に—」『日本歴史』五二六号（一九九二年三月）七九—九五頁、特に八六—八七頁。
- (11) V.Ferretti, *Il Giappone*....., op.cit.p.8-9 and 14-16.
- (12) Cf. the annotation on the tel.n.1482 of 21/4/1934, ASMAE (Historical Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry) SP, b. Giappone 6.
- (13) Related documents are in, ASMAE SP b.19.
- (14) V.Ferretti, *Il Giappone*....., op.cit.p.27-28. 池井優「一九四〇年「東京ホリエン」」入江昭・有賀貞編『戦間期の日本外交』東京大学出版会、一九八四年、一一一—一二二頁。
- (15) There is an abundant literature over the above topic. Cf. P.Pastorelli, *Dalla Prima Alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Momenti E Problemi Della Politica Estera*

Italiana, Led, Milano, 1997, chapter 6.

- (16) ヴァルット・フエロエツタイ、小林勝訳「海軍を通じてみた日伊関係―一九三五〜四〇―」『日本歴史』四二七号（一九八七年九月）、六九―八六頁。
- (17) V.Ferretti, *Il Giappone...*, op.cit.,chap.II and IV.
- (18) *Ibd.*,chap.V.
- (19) See for instance R.Mallett, "Fascist Foreign Policy And Official Italian Views Of Anthony Eden in the 1930s," *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2000) ,pp.157-187.
- (20) P.Pastorelli, *op.cit.*, pp.128-130.
- (21) V.Ferretti, *Il Giappone...*cit.pp.218ff. 前掲「海軍を通じてみた日伊関係―一九三五〜四〇―」七九頁以降。
- (22) V.Ferretti, "Sato Naotake's Mission to Rome in 1940,"in,I.Nish (ed.),*Contemporary European Writing on Japan*, Woodchurch, Ashford,1988,pp.76-9,263-4.
- (23) R.DE Felice, *Mussolini l'Alleato...* , op.cit.,pp.409-411.