

CHAPTER 5: JAPAN AND WORLD WAR I

2. LANSING-ISHII AGREEMENT

Dispatch of special envoy to US

The Lansing-Ishii Agreement, concluded during World War I, seems at first glance to signify a victory for Japanese diplomacy. However, if we probe beneath its surface by examining the language used in it, we realize that its value lies mainly in its exposure of the Americans' unmistakable distrust of and antipathy toward Japan at the time.

On September 5, 1914, not long after the European war had begun, Britain, France, and Russia signed the London Declaration Against Concluding Peace Separately. Ishii Kikujirō was then Japanese ambassador to France. He submitted a proposal to the Japanese government recommending that Japan sign the declaration so as to “secure her right to a voice in peace-making after the war.”¹ However, Foreign Minister Katō disagreed with Ishii, presuming that both Japan and Britain would necessarily be in complete agreement at the peace talks, given the terms of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. But in October 1915, by which time Ishii was foreign minister, there had been progress in the negotiations and on October 19, Japan signed the declaration.

The three signatory governments agreed not to conclude peace separately during the war, and to refrain from demanding conditions of peace unless each of the others were in favor thereof. However, the Japanese considered the latter provision to carry more weight. I mentioned earlier that when Britain asked Japan to send battleships to the Mediterranean in February 1917, Japan entered into an agreement with Britain whereby the latter promised to endorse Japanese claims to German possessions in Shandong province and north of the equator in the Pacific. Japan also signed similar agreements with Russia, France, and Italy in February and March. At long last Japan had succeeded in receiving promises of advance support at impending peace talks from Britain, Russia, France, and Italy. At the Paris Peace Conference Japan was now one of the five great powers, and what made that possible, according to Ishii, was signing the London Declaration. He believed that it was especially necessary for a developing nation like Japan to establish a foothold by seizing upon every opportunity to acquire the right to have its voice heard.

During World War I Japan's relationship with Russia acquired a greater degree of intimacy. In July 1916 the two nations signed the 4th Japan-Russia Secret Agreement, whereby both signatories recognized each other's special interests in the Far East. They promised to aid each other if a third-party nation attempted to infringe on their vital interests; if one signatory was obligated to go to battle to defend those interests, the other would provide military support. Unfortunately, that agreement terminated seven months later when the Russian Revolution broke out.

In April 1917 the US finally decided to enter the war. Following the example set by Britain and France, Japan, as one of the Allied nations, welcomed this news, and dispatched Ishii Kikujirō to the US as special envoy on a congratulatory mission. As Japan had already concluded agreements

¹ Kajima, *op. cit.*, 84.

with the other Allied nations, the Japanese were intent on arriving at an understanding with the Americans about Far Eastern policy during the special envoy's visit. At least that would have been the expected course of events. From Japan's perspective the Americans doggedly promoted the Open Door Policy and seemed inclined to check Japanese advances into Manchuria and Mongolia. Therefore, the Japanese earnestly hoped that Ishii's visit would provide an opportunity to gain recognition from the US of special Japanese interests in Manchuria and Mongolia, as well as China.

Ishii conjectured that since US advocacy of the Monroe Doctrine had resulted in a self-proclaimed American sphere of influence that extended 5,000 miles down to the tip of South America, then surely the Americans would acknowledge Japan's special interests in the destiny of China, from which it was separated only by a narrow strip of ocean. He believed that the US refused to recognize Japan's special interests because American entrepreneurs had begun to focus on China and its 400 million inhabitants as an attractive market, and because Woodrow Wilson had deep-seated personal objections to other major powers' marking out spheres of influence in China.²

Disagreement about interpretation of "special interests"

Ishii arrived in the US toward the end of August, and after completing his ceremonial duties, he hastened to Washington, D.C. for negotiations with Secretary of State Robert Lansing. As luck would have it, Lansing was the son-in-law of former Secretary of State John W. Foster, who became an adviser to the Chinese government after leaving the State Department. Consequently, and not unexpectedly, Lansing was a Sinophile.

On November 2, 1917, after hammering out their different points of view, the two men signed an official document, an exchange of notes, at the State Department. That was what is referred to today as the Lansing-Ishii Agreement.

The beginning of the agreement, which states the main point, reads as follows:

The governments of the United States and Japan recognize that territorial propinquity creates special relations between countries, and, consequently, the government of the United States recognizes that Japan has special interests in China, particularly in the part to which her possessions are contiguous.³

Later we have the following:

The governments of the United States and Japan deny that they have any purpose to infringe in any way the independence or territorial integrity of China, and they declare, furthermore, that they always adhere to the principle of the so-called "open door" or equal opportunity for commerce and industry in China.⁴

² Ishii, *op. cit.*

³ Kajima, *op. cit.*, 312.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Here the nuance is a bit different from that of the foregoing passage. And it is the interpretation of this part that left room for subsequent dispute.

Given that the purpose of the agreement was to convince the US to recognize Japan's special interests in China, it was a victory for Japanese diplomacy. However, in actuality, the US had no intention of recognizing those special interests. By applying special wording to the Lansing-Ishii Agreement, the US was attempting to narrow the meaning of "special interests" as they applied to Japan.

On August 11, 1919 at a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Lansing was pressed by Sen. William Borah and other Republicans to explain why the Democratic Party had seemed to concede that Japan had special interests in China. Lansing explained that Japan's "special interests in China" as described in the Lansing-Ishii Agreement were economic in nature, not political. But if Lansing's explanation was not intentionally deceptive from the outset (when the agreement was written), then it was simply bluster intended to conceal his own diplomatic defeat.

The reason for this conclusion can be found in Ishii's subsequent counterargument: The first paragraph in the agreement states that Japan's "special interests in China" are not political, but economic and commercial. In that case, it is completely at odds with the language in the second paragraph. Placing the statement about Japan's always adhering to the "principle of the so-called "open door" or equal opportunity for commerce and industry in China" after the statement that says Japan has special economic interests in China renders the words meaningless.

Stopgap American attempt to placate Japan

Why did the US enter into an agreement that caused so many problems, as far as its interpretation was concerned?

Here is Griswold's point of view:

Unlike the Taft-Katsura Agreement, or the Root-Takahira Agreement, with which it is so often compared, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement was not an intentional reversal, or modification of the American Far Eastern policy. Theodore Roosevelt had acted out of conviction, Lansing out of expediency. Roosevelt followed his executive agreements with Japan with mature expositions of American policy consistent with those agreements. Lansing complained of the circumstances that made necessary his concession to Japan's "special interests;" resorted to legal quibbling to limit their scope and, at Paris, did his best to undo them altogether. In 1917, American diplomacy was preparing, not retreating from, the greatest of all its offensives against Japanese expansion. Whatever comfort Japanese diplomats may have derived from the letter of the agreement, they were soon to discover that its spirit was not one of compromise. It was a stop-gap measure, a temporization, a grudging concession to the gnat of Japanese imperialism when the United States was girding itself to destroy the dragon of German autocracy.⁵

⁵ Griswold, *op. cit.*, 217.

Griswold certainly gets to the heart of the matter. The Lansing-Ishii Agreement was a temporary attempt to restrain the Japanese from making further advances in the Far East while the Americans were preoccupied with a European war. That is precisely why after the war had ended, the US made a concerted (and successful) effort to discard that agreement. As I shall explain later, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement was deemed to have lost its *raison d'être* when the Nine-Power Treaty was concluded at the Washington Conference, and was abrogated in April 1923.

Here are, in part, Ishii's remarks about the abrogation, written in later years.

But the phrase "Japan's special interests in China," as I have repeatedly stated above, merely described the actual conditions resulting from natural topography: those interests were not the gift of the United States. Mr. Lansing and I merely filled, so to say, the rôles of photographers. Even if we destroy the positive print because the finished photograph does not suit the taste of present-day Americans, the negative still remains. If we destroy even the negative, what can we do when the material object still remains? ... Even if the Lansing-Ishii Agreement is abolished, Japan's special interests in China remain there unshaken. The special interests which Japan possesses in China neither were created by an international agreement nor can they become the object of abolition.⁶

The foregoing was most certainly the Japanese perception of Japan's special interests prevailing at that time.

⁶ Ishii, *op. cit.*