

## 2. JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS IMPROVE

### Foreign Minister Hirota's promise: "non-aggression"

There was a time when some aspects of the Japan-China relationship improved markedly. Credit for that development belongs to Hirota Kōki, the one and only civil servant sent to the gallows by the IMTFE.

Hirota joined Prime Minister Saitō Makoto's Cabinet as foreign minister in September 1933, and remained in that position when Saitō was succeeded by Okada Keisuke in July 1934. On January 22, 1935, by which time Japan-China relations were finally approaching a state resembling normality, Hirota delivered an address before the Diet in which he announced that Japan's foreign policy would "embody the principles of non-aggression and non-menace."<sup>1</sup> The speech created a stir both at home and abroad. On January 26 Hirota spoke again, at the Lower House of the Diet: "I am confident that there will be no war while I am in office."<sup>2</sup> His words elicited a prodigious response from the halls of the Chinese government in Nanjing. In fact, Chiang Kai-shek lauded Hirota's speeches, saying that they provided an unparalleled impetus for the amelioration of relations between the two countries.

At a press conference on February 1, Chiang announced his guidelines for improving relations between China and Japan: "I sense the sincerity in Foreign Minister Hirota's addresses to the Diet. If we can dispel our past hostility toward Japan, and temper Japan's supercilious attitude toward China, I believe we can become good neighbors. If my compatriots behave fairly, intelligently, and ethically — if they suppress their baser impulses and refrain from anti-Japanese activity, I am certain that the Japanese will respond by acting in good faith."

On February 22 in Nanjing, Wang Jingwei, president of the Executive Yuan, spoke of the need to promote friendship with Japan because of its close geographic, historical, cultural, and ethnic connections with China. He added that the speech delivered by Sun Yat-sen in Kobe in 1924, which advocated a partnership between China and Japan (Pan-Asianism) formed the foundation for diplomacy between the two nations, and that Hirota's speeches were consistent with long-established Chinese priorities. Chiang Kai-shek, then in Hankou attempting to suppress the communists, heard of Wang's address and sent him a telegram in which he expressed his approval and promised his cooperation.

The Chinese did not stop with that declaration. Without prompting, they took steps toward eradicating anti-Japanese activity. On February 20 the Nationalist government ordered all newspapers and other media outlets in China to cease carrying anti-Japanese editorials. On February 28 Shao Yuanchong was dismissed from his position as Central Propaganda Department head (Shao had been overseeing the publication of anti-Japanese tracts). Moreover, the Nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> "Hirota's Speech on Foreign Relations," *New York Times*, 22 January 1935, 3; <https://www.nytimes.com/1935/01/22/archives/hirotas-speech-on-foreign-relations.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Byas, "Japanese Public Is Passive," *New York Times*, 26 January 1935, 10; <https://www.nytimes.com/1935/01/26/archives/japanese-public-is-passive.html>.

government made a genuine effort to emend anti-Japanese accounts in textbooks. On March 15, the Ministry of Education issued instructions to all municipal directors of education, prohibiting them from using textbooks not approved by the government.

Many unresolved problems remained in the Japan-China relationship, but the Hirota speeches provided momentum for the betterment of relations between the two countries, and genuine, if gradual, efforts were made to improve diplomatic relations.

### **Japanese legation upgraded to embassy**

In May 1935, when the fortunes of the Japan-China friendship were at an all-time high, Foreign Minister Hirota, having obtained Cabinet approval, made the decision to upgrade the Japanese legation to embassy status. He then appointed then Minister to China Ariyoshi Akira as Japan's first ambassador to China. When Wang Jingwei received a notification of this development, he was overjoyed: "Now the two nations will be able to walk hand in hand down the great path of East Asia." He then immediately promised to initiate a similar improvement on the Chinese side.

Apparently, when the UK, US, and Germany learned about Japan's decision, they felt that they had been blindsided. That was hardly the intention of the Japanese, who suggested that all the relevant Powers make the same upgrades. The most hesitant among them were the British, who insisted that their elevation be announced at the same time as Japan's. The Japanese agreed, and on May 17, 1935 Japan, China, and the UK issued a simultaneous announcement. Some historians argue that the exchange of ambassadors is purely a perfunctory, ceremonial procedure, and that there was no guarantee that it would resolve all the problems between Japan and China. They cannot bring themselves to commend Hirota for taking the initiative. Nevertheless, that upgrade was, without a doubt, a demonstration of respect for China. It is an accepted truth that mutual respect has been, and continues to be, an important factor in promoting friendship between nations. In that light, it makes sense to simply appreciate the elevation as a clear indication of Hirota's friendly stance toward China.