

*Sailor Diplomat: Nomura Kichisaburo and the Japanese-American War*,  
by Peter Mauch. (Harvard 2011)

Reviewed by Norman Hu.

Seven decades after the attack on Pearl Harbor, interest in the events leading up to the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States remains high, as does fascination with the negotiations which failed to bring about a lasting peace. While the roles of those in the United States—from the president and the secretary of state to lower-ranked officials in the State Department—have been extensively examined, the same cannot be said for the other side, with fewer works in English devoted to examining the part played by Japanese in those pre-war talks. Peter Mauch has produced the first biography in English highlighting the role of Nomura Kichisaburo, Japan's ambassador to Washington in 1941. Mauch draws together various strands of Nomura's life: his decorated naval career; his practical training in key postings throughout Europe, Asia, and North America; and his apprenticeship of sorts under prominent Japanese internationalists who advocated cooperation with other nations. The author develops the central argument that these factors, in particular his naval background, come together to inform his role as ambassador, and the book is a welcome addition to the literature.

In the first three of ten chapters, Mauch traces Nomura's beginnings from that of a young cadet at the Etajima naval academy, where he graduated second in his class. These outstanding results marked him out for recognition, taking him during his early career regularly to the United States. He first went as a midshipman in 1899, visiting ports of call on the West Coast and Alaska. In 1908 he was assigned to the Japanese embassy in Austria, and his tour of duty in Europe took him to the Lowlands, Britain, France, the Balkans, and Germany. He then further rounded out his credentials as a gunboat diplomat in China (1911), and a naval bureaucrat in Tokyo (1912), but eventually returned to the U.S. with a promotion to attaché at the Japanese embassy in Washington (1914). There, he produced intelligence reports throughout the war years, and returned home as one of Japan's leading experts on the U.S.

Politically, Nomura gravitated towards the cause of naval arms limitation through international consent, serving under men such as Kato Tomosaburo for whom he worked as an adjutant at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and the Washington Conference (1921-1922). As Mauch argues in chapter four, Nomura came to believe that naval limitation by international treaty was in the best interests of Japan's national security, not a restraint on Japan as critics maintained, but rather a curb on the U.S. with whom it was recognized Japan could not compete economically. The Washington Conference established a 5:5:3 ratio limiting capital ship building for the U.S., Britain, and Japan, respectively. Nomura returned to the United States in 1929, commanding a training squadron tour of

that country; he was warmly welcomed at major naval installations across the U.S., and was even invited to dine at the White House with the president.

In chapter five, Mauch examines the years shortly following Nomura's retirement. Those in the so-called fleet faction who championed a greater naval ratio for Japan—at first calling for 70 percent that of the United States, but later demanding parity—came to sideline people like Nomura who supported fleet limitation. In 1937, Nomura was retired from the active duty list to become headmaster of the Peers School where the crown prince was to study. He then accepted the post of foreign minister in 1939, ostensibly to sort out U.S.-Japan relations at a time when Washington announced its wish to terminate their bilateral commercial treaty in protest against Japan's "new order in East Asia." Nomura was tipped for the post in view of his cordial ties with prominent leaders in Washington over the years; indeed, U.S. Ambassador Joseph Grew filed glowing reports. However, Nomura's tenure at the ministry was marred by bitter disagreements and internal opposition, including an uproar over an Army attempt to wrest the trade portfolio from career diplomats. Failure to reconcile Japan's New East Asian Order with American insistence on the open door policy being applied to all parts of China, culminated in the expiration of the commercial treaty and signaled the collapse of Nomura's ministry. The cabinet fell in January 1940 after a mere five months.

The remaining five chapters of Mauch's book deal largely with Nomura's role as ambassador to the United States in 1941: the events leading up to his appointment; the thorny negotiations in Washington; and the subsequent failure of his mission. Mauch loosely follows the outline of Nomura's career found in Kiba Kosuke's biography of Nomura, published in Japan in 1961. Kiba's epic study (almost 900 pages) benefited from personal interviews with Nomura, and extensive access to his private materials. This essential reference also provided the structural framework for two other Nomura biographies, published in Japan in the 1990s, neither of which has been referenced by Mauch. These are Oshio Hisashi's "Regrets of Ambassador Nomura" [*Chu-Bei taishi Nomura Kichisaburo no munen*] published in 1994; and Toyoda Jo's "Ill-fated Ambassador" [*Hi-un no taishi*] published in 1995. These two books rely more heavily on first hand accounts of the talks by those on the Japanese negotiating side. These include people such as Sanematsu Yuzuru, one of Nomura's naval attachés, and Frederick Moore, special advisor to the Japanese embassy. Unlike Mauch both Oshio and Toyoda, as the titles of their books suggest, tend to emphasize the bleak outcome of Nomura's mission.

Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke is usually credited with persuading a reluctant Nomura to take up the crucial posting to Washington. In contrast, Mauch stresses the central role played by Nomura's naval background; he relates instead how Nomura felt he had the backing of important naval elements for his conciliatory position towards the U.S., which in turn led him to believe he could all but ignore Matsuoka, and be more than a mere "messenger boy." In hindsight though,

Nomura later conceded in Kiba's 1961 biography that his navy colleagues may have set him up for a fall; he had been warned, even before leaving for Washington, to be wary lest those words of support amounted to nothing, and that "the ladder could be yanked away" by those same naval elements. This reviewer believes Nomura's awareness that support from the navy wasn't unconditional diminishes, or at least somewhat tempers, Mauch's main contention that Nomura was acting as a "sailor diplomat" with the tacit approval of the Japanese navy.

With the political stakes in 1941 so high, it is hard to know whether anyone could have successfully carried out the mission Nomura was given to resolve outstanding trade issues and obtain a peaceful settlement with the Americans. Mauch claims that Nomura was a "hard-nosed realist" who was straitjacketed by the harsh and conflicting circumstances of his diplomatic position. This portrayal is in stark contrast to the typical figure cut by Nomura in the established literature as a practitioner of "amateurish diplomacy" (*shiroto no gaiko*). One of the most enduring images of the prewar talks is that of an irate American secretary of state berating Nomura and fellow ambassador Kuru Saburo on the day of the Pearl Harbor attack after hostilities had commenced. Secretary Cordell Hull accused them of "infamous falsehoods and distortions," and later deplored the "ineptitude" with which Nomura had handled their talks (Hull, 1948). This "enduring image" may partially account for why many historians remember Nomura as incompetent or duplicitous, and disregard or disparage his genuine efforts to normalize relations.

There are other factors which contribute to poor perceptions of Nomura, not least of which are textual problems with the paper record of the talks. Confidential cable intercepts, known as MAGIC, provided the Allies with a covert view of diplomatic mail between Ambassador Nomura and his bosses in Tokyo, often before the intended recipients had a chance to read them. Ever since these intercepts came to light at congressional hearings into the Pearl Harbor attack, they have been used frequently in scholarly treatments of the negotiations between Hull and Nomura. Technically though, they are littered with transcription errors and glaring mistranslations. There are frequent omissions and garbled phrases, poorly worded or misleading expressions, and even occasional gibberish. The intercepts are generally translated with a tone of suspicion, making any statement prepared in the context of a confidential report from an ambassador to his home government sound somehow nefarious.

As an antidote to this distortion, Mauch makes judicious use of original Japanese transcripts of the diplomatic cables in question, which were gathered together from intact documents retained by ministry and military sources in Tokyo, and published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1991 [*Nihon Gaiko Bunsho: Nichi-Bei Kosho, 1941*]. However, this set of documents is not without its own problems, and sometimes does not take into account confusing and independent steps taken by Nomura and his staff in the field. On occasion, Nomura took matters into

his own hands by rewriting or rearranging passages, and omitting whole phrases or documents, without the knowledge of Tokyo. The official record, as released in 1991, sometimes does not match the documents Nomura published himself in 1946, to accompany his memoirs of the talks. A less than meticulous reading of *Nichi-Bei Kosho, 1941* would fail to uncover these discrepancies, and may skew the interpretation of events that unfolded in Nomura's name.

Mauch, however, is not swayed by accusations of Nomura's incompetence, and instead emphasizes his role in warning Tokyo "against their complacent and ill-founded assumptions concerning the issue of war and peace with the United States." How much credence was given in Tokyo to Nomura's reasoned counsel and careful analysis? Not much at all, if the unfolding advance through Southeast Asia despite Nomura's consistent warnings is any indication. Nomura warned frequently that any military moves there would be construed as a threat to British interests, which in turn were inextricably linked to American interests. Was Nomura merely sending his "hard-nosed" messages into the void? It is definitely a curse to have the gift of prophecy when, like Cassandra from Greek mythology, your predictions and warnings in the face of disaster are ignored.

Conflicting views of Nomura's performance are to be expected, given the delicate nature of this mission and his "failure" to produce a satisfactory agreement. The battle to characterize Nomura's role or legacy has been fought periodically. Some historians like Hosoya Chihiro contend that he was a "poor communicator" who ignored instructions from the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo, failed to deliver important messages, and willfully distorted others. Nomura presented personal proposals to Hull "without any instructions from Tokyo," and made (qualified) promises to the Americans for the withdrawal of Japanese troops from China, assurances that exceeded his authority and which no seasoned diplomat would have made (Hosoya, 1973). On the other hand, others like Hillary Conroy suggest that Nomura's optimism and ambiguity, rather than signs of ineptitude or stupidity, may have been "purposefully used to expand opportunities for averting hostilities." Did he deliberately withhold contentious documents from the Americans because, if presented as ordered, they might have scuttled the "conversations"? Did he see himself as more than a mere "transmitter of documents," with tacit approval to pursue alternative courses of action (Conroy, 1974)?

Others have taken a more critical view of Nomura's efforts than even that of Hosoya Chihiro, outlined above. While the American public remained largely unified against any involvement in "foreign wars," some historians such as Seishiro Sugihara believe Roosevelt and Hull were poised to manipulate potential confrontations with Japan as a back door to American participation in the war in Europe. Sugihara questions the Roosevelt administration's sincerity in trying to avoid conflict with Japan, and believes Nomura was merely their cat's-paw in an overall push to ensure the U.S. had a "clean record" in the event of any war. By failing to anticipate these and other strategies on the American side, as well as

being completely unaware that MAGIC was eavesdropping on their every move, the Japanese Foreign Ministry and its ambassador in Washington demonstrated an exceptional level of incompetence and inanity [*gumai*], and were surely, as much as their American counterparts, directly culpable for the failure of diplomatic efforts in the period preceding Pearl Harbor (Sugihara, 1995, 1997). Mauch makes no mention of these strategic errors by Nomura, or indeed errors of any significance, and glosses over Nomura's numerous mistakes.

It would be instructive to compare Nomura's experience with those of other Japanese diplomats who felt similarly conflicted. Did they too take matters into their own hands, and ignore direct orders, twist official policy for greater humanitarian goals, and finesse instructions to bring about a kinder, more rational result? Sugihara Chiune, Japan's vice consul in Lithuania, springs to mind for the thousands of visas he issued, counter to official Japanese policy, to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. It would also be useful to look at diplomats on the Allied side who, like Nomura, feared the headlong rush to war between the U.S. and Japan, but whose counsel to their home governments was similarly ignored. It could be said that people like Joseph Grew were also powerless to dissuade their government(s) from taking a hard line against a potential adversary.

It is clear the author agrees more with Conroy's characterization of Nomura as a pragmatist. Mauch begrudgingly acknowledges in his epilogue Nomura's "litany of errors," but it seems to this reviewer that his distaste for spending more time carefully considering or even debunking the "litany" does Nomura no favors. If Nomura was a lone voice in the wilderness, why not state this directly as an act of bravery in a time of conformism and the lunge towards oblivion? Why not spend more than a few scant paragraphs in the epilogue to list, and then set aside, these errors? More might have been made of the tragic nature of a figure who saw all too clearly the bankrupt path his country was headed down, but who was powerless to influence successive cabinets in Tokyo which took progressively more expansionist measures. Did Nomura allow his view of the world as a naval man, or his niche role as the "friendly Japanese" in an insider's Washington, or even his genuine desire for Japanese cooperation with other countries, to interfere with his responsibilities towards his own country and government? Mauch could have done more to examine these failings, which in essence defined Nomura's tenure as ambassador.

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Norman Hu is a freelance translator who received his M.A. from The George Washington University, specializing in East Asian politics and history. He has translated works by Seishiro Sugihara including *Between Incompetence and Culpability: Assessing the Diplomacy of Japan's Foreign Ministry from Pearl Harbor to Potsdam* (UPA, 1997) and *Chiune Sugihara and Japan's Foreign Ministry: Between Incompetence and Culpability Part 2* (UPA 2001).