Theodore Roosevelt and the Portsmouth Peace Conference: the Riddle and Ripple of His Forbearance

MATSUMURA MASAYOSHI

In the summer heat of 1905, the peace negotiations between Russian and Japanese plenipotentiaries were being held across a large table at the Portsmouth Naval Base, New Hampshire. Talks had progressed in fits and starts with some animated debate, but now on 10 August, during the very first week of the conference, they appeared to be heading for deadlock. The possibility of finding a resolution rested on two key issues, the payment of a reimbursement rather than an indemnity and the partition of Sakhalin. At this critical juncture, the US president Theodore Roosevelt, who had been instrumental in bringing the two sides together, feared that the situation might deteriorate still further and that the talks could break down altogether. On 19 August, he invited the Russian plenipotentiary, Roman Rosen, to his house at Sagamore Hill in Oyster Bay on the outskirts of New York and set about directly brokering a peace agreement by calling on the Russians to make concessions to Japan.

This attempt at mediation began in earnest two days later on 21 August after Baron Kaneko Kentarō, a member of the House of Peers, visited Roosevelt at his house to find out the import of his conversation with Rosen.¹ That evening, having heard Kaneko’s opinion, Roosevelt sent a telegram to George von Lengerke Meyer, the US ambassador in St Petersburg, instructing him to present a personal message on his behalf to the tsar and persuade him to achieve a peace settlement by making concessions to Japan. That same night Roosevelt also sent letters to the French and German ambassadors in Washington enclosing copies
of this message. In these he called on the governments of both countries to use their special connections with Russia – France as an ally and Germany since Kaiser Wilhelm II was a relative of the tsar – to persuade Nicholas II to conclude peace by making concessions to Japan.

THE COOL STANCE OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

In his efforts to achieve peace with this strategy, how would Roosevelt approach Britain, a country that on the one hand had a special relationship with the United States but also saw Russia as an adversary from her position in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance? When Ambassador Meyer replied, he sent him a second telegram two days later on 23 August about one-third the length of the first message but with the same import. At the same time he wrote a letter to Henry White, the US ambassador in Britain, in which, while lamenting Britain’s apparent reticence to use her influence as an ally to persuade Japan to be more reasonable, he stated that he would do whatever he could himself.2

On the same day, in another line of approach, Roosevelt wrote to Sir Mortimer Durand, the British ambassador in Washington, emphasizing that he thought Japan was justified in continuing to fight if the objective was territory in Sakhalin rather than financial gain. Durand promptly sent a telegram to London reporting this message, but the British Government responded coolly to the president’s artful challenge. The following day, Foreign Secretary Lansdowne replied: ‘This is a suggestion that we should press the Japanese to make further concessions. Were we to do so our advice would not be taken and would be resented.’3

Lansdowne’s uncooperative attitude is thought to have been due to his lack of trust in Roosevelt and also because of the curious relations that existed between Britain and Japan, which were hardly close considering that the two countries were supposed to be allies.4 Britain’s leaders repeatedly questioned Roosevelt’s role on the stage of world politics, a doubt exacerbated by a touch of jealousy at his conspicuous activities in not just arranging but directly intervening in the peace talks between Russia and Japan.

At any rate their cool stance towards him can be seen from the fact that right until the end of the peace conference Roosevelt was unaware that on 12 August, two days after talks had begun in Portsmouth, a revised Anglo-Japanese Alliance had been signed in London, converting what had been a defensive arrangement into an alliance that enabled offensive operations not just within the Far East but over a wide area including India.5

Despite the British Government’s lukewarm attitude towards the Russo-Japanese peace talks, however, Japan’s relations with Britain took an immediate turn for the better when Sir Claude MacDonald, the British Minister to Japan, revealed some top-secret news to Ishii Kikujirō, Chief of the Bureau for Commerce and Head of the Telegraph Section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Albeit received in the informal guise of a