Fighting Behind the Scenes: Developments in German Far East Policy, 1935–1936

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1 Introduction

In 1936, Nazi Germany concluded three important agreements pertaining to its Far East policy. On 8 April, the Reich signed an agreement with the Jiang Jie-shi (Chiang Kai-shek) government granting a 100-million reichsmark line of credit to China, in effect affirming support for China’s efforts to expand its military in order to counter Japan. Less than a month later, on 30 April, Germany entered into a bilateral trade agreement with
Manchuria (Manchukuo), and because it established trade relations directly with Manchuria, the agreement constituted *de facto* diplomatic recognition.\(^1\) Barely half a year later, on 25 November 1936, Germany concluded the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan, forging closer political ties between the two countries in order to more effectively block the Soviet Union and the Communist International (Comintern).

Numerous studies have noted the salient points in the contradictory turn taken by German policy towards the Far East at that time. To begin with, it reflected a domestic political confrontation between the Nazi faction, which took a pro-Japanese stand, and Germany’s established ruling institutions (the foreign, defence and economic ministries), which backed China. Second, the process of transition from a pro-China to a pro-Japan Far East policy was clearly linked to Nazification, which proceeded through a programme of coordination and coerced uniformity throughout German society known as *Gleichschaltung*. Third, the policy shift necessarily had a decisive impact on the foreign and war policies of both Japan and China.

While these points are significant, research so far has not explained what specific political processes, what mechanisms, were brought into play to push the Nazi pro-Japanese policy into place. Analysing the process leading to conclusion of the German-Japanese Anti-Comintern Pact, for example, many studies have all but ignored the role played by the German foreign and war ministries. This oversight is clearly revealed in such erroneous views as, ‘The German Foreign Ministry did not know for more than half a year that anti-communist pact talks had been going on between the parties concerned in Japan and Germany’\(^2\) and ‘The Foreign Ministry received information about the Japan-Germany alliance through Herbert von Dirksen, German ambassador in Tōkyō, only a few weeks prior to the conclusion of the Anti-Comintern Pact.’\(^3\)

Such conclusions are a pitfall in this area of research, created partly by the difficulty of finding relevant historical materials, especially those by pro-Japanese Germans of the time. Also to blame is the *a priori* assumption that the Third Reich’s foreign policy was under ‘Hitler’s absolute command’ (*ein absolutes Regiment*).\(^4\) This notion has discouraged researchers from attempting detailed analysis of the process of German foreign policymaking, including the Reich’s Far East policy. In effect, all changes in German foreign policy under the Third Reich have been attributed to initiatives by Hitler.

While addressing the above points, this chapter presents an analysis of the process by which policy shifted from a pro-Chinese to a pro-Japanese orientation. Based on that analysis, my argument is structured around three points in particular.

First, the policy shift was not a direct outcome of Adolf Hitler’s own wish for stronger alignment with Japan so much as it was a reflection of a power struggle going on within the government of the Third Reich. The part Hitler played in that process was indeed important, but here we go beyond his role to focus on the thoughts and activities of personnel