Germany and Japan, 1937–1945: From the outbreak of the China War to German surrender

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1 INTRODUCTION

When Hitler seized power in 1933 a rapprochement with Japan seemed improbable. His dream partners were Great Britain and Italy. Furthermore, his racism held all non-European people in contempt, including the Americans, who he thought were a mixture with Jews and Africans. For the same racist reasons, he did not like the Japanese, or other Asian peoples, though he admired their militarism, patriotism, fighting spirit and defiance of death. Only Hitler’s aversion to communism and the Soviet Union showed congruence with Japan. When the Anti-Comintern Pact was concluded in 1936, at first glance it was not at odds with Hitler’s aspirations for good relations with Britain. Very soon, however, it became apparent that the treaty with Japan not only endangered relations with the USSR but also with other states, among them the Anglo-Saxon nations, where the rapprochement
between Germany and Japan, both totalitarian and obviously expansionary, was observed with deep suspicion. Even within Japan where international tensions and dictatorial tendencies were feared, the treaty encountered a certain aversion, with the result that relations with Germany soon cooled down.

**2 THE OUTBREAK OF THE CHINA WAR AND JAPANESE-GERMAN-ITALIAN NEGOTIATIONS FOR A MILITARY ALLIANCE**

From Berlin’s viewpoint, relations were further stressed by the China War, which broke out in July 1937 and which was in total contradiction to Hitler’s aims. Germany had strong economic interests in China and even hoped to find a military partner in Chiang Kai-shek’s regime against the Soviet Union. Therefore, in an effort to overcome the dilemma to have to choose between the two nations at war with each other, Germany agreed to a proposal of the Japanese general staff to mediate between Tōkyō and Nanking. In January 1938, however, these endeavours failed due to the hard-line attitude of the first Cabinet of Prince Konoe Fumimaro, which repeatedly presented new conditions.1 Since Japan seemed to be the stronger partner, Germany reluctantly gave up its strong political and economic position in China. It agreed to end all armament shipments, withdrew the German military advisers to the Kuomintang army, and recognized the puppet state of ‘Manchukuo’.

When in summer 1938 it became clear that Japan could not defeat China in a short war, as expected, but that instead it got into an increasing quagmire, the danger grew of intervention in support of Chiang Kai-shek by foreign powers, particularly Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Therefore, a plan developed in Tōkyō to conclude a military alliance with Germany against the USSR, and another one with Italy, which had joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1937, against Britain. Japan was impressed very much by Germany’s rearmament and its aggressive policy towards the great powers, while Italy was admired because it had conquered Ethiopia in 1935/36 in spite of the opposition of the League of Nations and notwithstanding British superiority at sea and in the air. In Berlin and Rome the Japanese plan met with interest, since both were in need of an instrument to deter and intimidate the other powers. Hitler’s goal of an alliance with Britain had turned out to be a mere illusion. Soon negotiations started, not about two separate treaties as originally planned by Japan, but about a Tripartite alliance, since Germany reasoned that the deterrence would be greater.2

When Konoe resigned in January 1939 due to stalemate in the China War, the negotiations continued under the Cabinet of Hiranuma Kiichirō; but they dragged out until August of that year without showing decisive results. The main point of the differences was the question against which powers the alliance should be directed: only against the Soviet Union, as Japan wished, or also against Great Britain and France, as Germany and Italy demanded – having come to the conclusion that