

**Peter Mauch.** "A Bolt from the Blue? New Evidence on the Japanese Navy and the Draft Understanding Between Japan and the United States, April 1941." *Pacific Historical Review* 78:1 (February 2009): 55-79. DOI: 10.1525/phr.2009.78.1.55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/phr.2009.78.1.55> .

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Review by **Michael A. Barnhart, SUNY-Stony Brook**

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In the course of his research on a biography of Admiral Nomura Kichisaburō, a work much anticipated, Professor Mauch gained access to a hitherto unavailable trove of the admiral's personal papers. One key document among these, and the subject of the article under review, is a memorandum from the Navy Ministry and General Staff to the Naval Attaché in Washington. Besides its content, its timing is of considerable interest, inasmuch as it was sent several days before Nomura transmitted the so-called "Draft Understanding" between the United States and Japan to his government. As such, and as Mauch rightly argues, it is confirmation at last that at least the Imperial Navy was well aware of the purport and in all likelihood the precise details of the Draft Understanding. Prior scholarly interpretations of this crucial episode in Japanese-American relations before Pearl Harbor, interpretations that place much blame at Nomura's feet for amateurish diplomacy that misled the Japanese government into believing that the Draft Understanding was an American proposal, need to be seriously reassessed if not discarded altogether.

Mauch provides a translation of the entire dispatch. There is no doubt that Nomura is off the hook. And so long as Mauch's account stays with Nomura himself there is scant room for cavil. But the revelations from this document, at least, do more to confirm our understanding of the tortuous nature of Japanese policymaking in 1941 than overthrow it. To put things another way, while the black hat is off Nomura, it is on the old horses of interservice rivalry and the excruciating dilemma of the Imperial Navy's position more than ever.

That dilemma certainly was excruciating. The alliance with Germany of September 1940 had failed to soften American aid toward China and pressure against Japan. The Imperial Navy had barely fended off the Imperial Army's desire for a quick and comprehensive

“Southward Advance” in 1940 by arguing that such an advance—an occupation of French, Dutch, and British colonies left defenseless by Germany’s victories in Europe—would inevitably involve war with the United States. As virtually every officer in the Navy realized, this was a war they could not win, not if the Americans chose to prosecute it. Yet the Navy could hardly admit this stark fact. If it did, it would have to concede (to the Imperial Army) that every yen spent on building battleships had been wasted or, as one army officer expostulated, it would have to concede that the Navy was a worthless, expensive toy.

Tighter focus on this truth would have lent greater analytical depth to Mauch’s document and article and hence to Nomura’s role. For example, while it is true that we have not known before of these telegrams, we have known that Nomura was chosen to lead the Japanese embassy’s crucial negotiations with Washington in 1941. Why? There were other Japanese, after all, who could equal Nomura’s knowledge of the Americans. But Nomura had one advantage over them: he was a navy man. Should we be quite as surprised, in the end, that the navy was interested enough in a way out of its dilemma to engineer the choice of one of its own? Mauch is absolutely right to observe that it was “*the naval authorities in Tokyo, not Nomura*” [emphasis in original] who informed neither the Imperial Army nor Foreign Ministry of the Draft Understanding prior to its unveiling. But, again, how surprising should this reticence really be?

Mauch points out, again correctly, that one reason the navy, meaning his chief villain, Navy Minister Oikawa Koshirō, feared informing the army was budgetary: a rapprochement with the Americans meant no justification for battleship construction. But two points need inclusion. First, the navy had vetoed the Southward Advance in 1940, specifically demanding higher budgetary allocations given the advance’s likely collision with America when (not if) it was begun. Second, the army itself had changed its position on the Southward Advance at exactly the time the navy and Nomura were exchanging telegrams over the Draft Understanding. Far from forcefully advocating an immediate and sweeping advance against the European colonies, the army by early 1941 wanted to collect its forces and resources in northern Manchuria. The reason was not hard to see: the Imperial Army (and apparently everyone on the planet save Joseph Stalin) knew that Germany was about to attack the Soviet Union and it wanted in on the action.

This was a horror show for the navy. A “Northward Advance” would be an all-army affair with corresponding and major budgetary adjustments, at exactly the time the Americans were radically increasing their own fleet. One escape was indeed rapprochement with the United States. But at what cost? A rapprochement born of weakness would reveal that navy as that worthless toy. But it also ran counter to Japan’s alliance with Germany, which the army valued more than ever. Without some payoff for the army, there was scant prospect of the army’s agreeing to any understanding.

That payoff was to be China. Active American assistance in forcing China to come to terms with (that is, surrender to) Japan was a prize beyond value for an Imperial Army deeply bogged down there and eager to divert forces to attacking the Soviet Union. Mauch’s

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document confirms that the navy, and especially the not-so-amateurish Nomura, understood this point perfectly well.

The problem, not just for Nomura but for Oikawa (not a man to evoke much sympathy, but he really was in an impossible position), was that the United States had to agree. That is another story, and one hopefully addressed in Mauch's wider study.

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