Conclusion: Diplomacy and Democracy

Life and Legacy

In this book I have traced some of the details of Shidehara Kijurō’s life alongside the currents of Japanese diplomatic history. I would like to conclude with a look back upon Shidehara’s life and legacy.

Shidehara was born in Osaka, the second son of a wealthy farmer. Passing the diplomatic service exam, he began his career as a consular assistant in Incheon, Korea. He would subsequently move through positions such as consul in Busan, Telegram Division director, Investigation Bureau director-general, councillor at Japan’s embassy in the US, councillor at Japan’s embassy in the UK and minister to the Netherlands. In 1903, he would marry Masako, the youngest daughter of Iwasaki Yatarō, the founder of Mitsubishi, thereby becoming a brother-in-law to Katō Takaaki. The arrangement of his marriage to Masako was mediated by Ishii Kikujirō. Shidehara, who had been raised in fortunate circumstances, now also acquired influential connections. After Foreign Minister Katō ran into trouble with his issuing of the Twenty-One Demands to China during the Ōkuma cabinet, Katō was succeeded by Ishii. Under Foreign Minister Ishii, Shidehara became vice-minister for foreign affairs in 1915.

Shidehara would go on to serve as vice-minister for foreign affairs under Motono Ichirō, Gotō Shinpei and Uchida Yasuya. Later, with the formation of the Hara cabinet in 1919, Shidehara was selected for the important position of ambassador to the US. Representing Japan at the Washington Naval Conference as plenipotentiary representative, Shidehara succeeded in concluding a deal despite suffering at the time from kidney stones. Following his return to Japan, Shidehara would serve
as foreign minister for a combined total of over five years, beginning in the Katō Takaaki cabinet. In the 1920s, Shidehara entered the best years of his career. In 1930, he helped guide the London Naval Conference on Disarmament to a successful conclusion. However, he left the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the Manchurian Incident and, with increasing anguish, watched the country proceed towards the Pacific War. Yet defeat and occupation changed matters completely, with Shidehara becoming Japan’s forty-fourth prime minister in October 1945. In his final years, he assumed the office of speaker of the House of Representatives in the Diet.

What did Shidehara seek to achieve through diplomacy in the prewar era? In general, Shidehara’s diplomacy is considered to have been based on the ideal of international cooperation, with a corresponding emphasis upon maintaining an open door policy in East Asia. The reality is not so simple, however. While Shidehara accepted having an open door policy as a general principle, he sought to restrict its application in practice. Shidehara similarly had a narrow interpretation of the open door article included in the Nine-Power Treaty signed at the Washington Naval Conference. He saw it mainly in the context of equal opportunity—that is to say, the sense in which it was used in the first open door policy note. To put it another way, Shidehara was against other nations intervening in China’s domestic politics. There was a certain policy goal that formed the background to this interpretation: the protection of Japan’s interests in China. It was with an eye towards this goal that Shidehara wanted to recognise the ‘open door policy’ as a basic rule while also restricting its application. Japan was conscious of its special interests on the Asian continent, and, in his own way, Shidehara likewise wished to promote Japan’s national interest.

Shidehara’s guiding principle at this time was to respect the spirit of the Washington Naval Conference while also supporting China’s unification. As seen with the example of the Beijing Special Conference on Tariffs, for the most part, Shidehara’s conception of regional order remained within the framework established at the Washington Naval Conference. Shidehara’s approach is exemplified in his response to the Northern Expedition, where he emphasised economic benefits such as trade and freedom of residence and defended them on the basis of the spirit of the Washington Naval Conference. Yet there were also occasions where he promoted the expansion of Japan’s benefits in China, and not just their protection. We see this attitude in his approval of the construction of the Taoang Railway, despite the fact that this undertaking ran counter
to the agreement reached with the New Four-Power Consortium. What this shows, I have suggested, is that even Shidehara was not free of the tradition of Japanese diplomacy.

What sets Shidehara apart from the above tradition most is that, following from his perspective that China’s unification ought to be accepted, he implemented a policy of non-intervention in that nation’s domestic affairs. Shidehara valued the promotion of political stability as well as economic diplomacy. In particular, when the Nanjing Incident of 1927 occurred during the Northern Expedition, Shidehara believed it had been orchestrated not by Chiang Kai-shek but by the ‘communists’. To support political stability in China, Shidehara argued that ‘peaceful and diplomatic methods’ needed to be used to help ‘a central figure such as Chiang Kai-shek’ restore order. At the basis of this judgement was an understanding of national benefit that prioritised economic benefits. Shidehara demonstrated enthusiasm for enhanced trade with southern China and was also well informed on issues such as Japanese immigration to the US. As a principle, Shidehara believed in pursuing an ‘honest diplomacy’ based on building relationships of trust.

From a present-day perspective, one could conclude that Shidehara’s policies were basically correct when viewed in the long-term. Yet, when viewed in the short-term, it is hard to see in them any concrete plans for protecting Japan’s residents and interests in China. Thus, it seems unlikely that such policies could have convinced domestic audiences. The truth was that Shidehara operated within the framework of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and did not pay much attention to the Japanese political context. If party politics in Japan had been more stable, then Shidehara might well have made an outstanding foreign minister. In this sense, his relationship with Prime Minister Hamaguchi represented the best-case scenario for Shidehara’s career. With the London Naval Conference on Disarmament during the Hamaguchi cabinet, cooperative diplomacy reached its peak under Japanese party-based politics. However, the success of the London Naval Conference did not directly lead to improvements in other areas, such as Japan’s relationship with the US. Instead, cooperation with the US on matters such as China policy and the revision of the Japanese Exclusion Act remained elusive.

Another side to Shidehara’s career at this time, as the Manchurian Incident demonstrated, was that he showed himself to be inept at handling crises. During the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War, Mutsu
Munemitsu and Komura Jutarō had earned renown. By contrast, the Manchurian Incident led to the collapse of Shidehara diplomacy. This is a decisive difference. Of course, it would be unjust to blame this failure on Shidehara alone. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could not fully respond to overseas crises and domestic criticism at the same time. Even if it was at the beginning of the Goken Sanpa cabinet that Shidehara was entrusted with the nation’s diplomacy, the next stage should have been for the political parties to seriously discuss the future direction of Japan’s diplomatic efforts.

After leaving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the end of 1931, Shidehara was soon largely forgotten. While in political opposition, the only time that he directly engaged in diplomatic efforts was for the Japan–Soviet Fisheries Interim Agreement. Shidehara nevertheless retained a sharp mind, as evidenced by his cooperation with the compilation of historical documents for the ministry’s Research Department. When World War II broke out, he also showed discernment when giving his views on how affairs might unfold. Yet Shidehara did not take the kind of decisive action that Yoshida Shigeru did. He argued for concluding an early peace when the Pacific War began, yet, in the maelstrom of the war’s final days, he embraced the doctrine of bitter end resistance.

Shidehara enjoyed a reversal of fortunes with the coming of the Allied occupation. As prime minister, he endeavoured to secure the continued existence of the emperor system and was involved in the related undertaking of creating a new constitution. Shidehara further worked to rebuild the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, anticipating that it would be important once Japan had regained its sovereignty. He also protected his diplomat colleagues Shiratori Toshio and Shigemitsu Mamoru during the Tokyo Trial. Last, by establishing the Foreign Service Training Institute, Shidehara sought to help the ministry retain the pool of talented staffs that it required.

In his final years, during his term as speaker of the House of Representatives, Shidehara sought to utilise his experience to improve postwar Japan’s foreign relations. Here, I refer first to his support for keeping Japan only lightly armed, so that more resources could be directed toward economically oriented diplomatic engagement with the surrounding region. Second, I refer to his promotion of cooperation with the UK and the US to foster political stability and development in East Asia. Shidehara was thus even more enthusiastic than Yoshida in wanting
an ongoing US military presence in Japan, a fact that was conveyed to Dulles. In Shidehara’s opinion, restoring trust between Japan and its foreign counterparts was essential, and for this he believed the promotion of nonpartisan diplomacy was indispensable.

In summary, Shidehara was an internationalist who most clearly embodied cooperative diplomacy with the US and UK at the time. The reason Shidehara became a prime minister during the occupation period was because of the reputation he had built as a foreign minister before the war. But Shidehara had a different face when it came to Asia. He took the annexation of Korea for granted and was reluctant to abolish China’s unequal treaties, which had an imperialistic aspect from today’s perspective. In this sense, Shidehara was an internationalist with an imperialist dimension.

Dilemma between Diplomacy and Democracy

Shidehara’s trajectory highlights a certain dilemma with respect to conducting diplomacy in the age of party politics. I am speaking of the compatibility of democracy with stable (i.e. bureaucratically managed, nonpartisan) diplomacy. In a sense, this was a consistent theme in Shidehara’s life work. Here ‘democracy’ has a broad meaning, referring to the presence not only of party-based cabinets but also of a political opposition, public opinion and the press. If that is the case, what kind of relationship should there be between democracy and diplomacy? These are difficult bedfellows in any era. If diplomacy ignores the will of the people, it is bound to fail. Yet diplomacy will also run into difficulty if it panders to the public.

From Shidehara’s perspective, party-based politics was desirable. Yet he also believed that diplomatic continuity was essential. This was because diplomacy could affect a nation’s dignity. Diplomatic policy therefore ought not to be significantly swayed by the changing of governments. This is why Shidehara sought the centralisation of diplomatic efforts under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was also why he was not overly concerned with domestic politics. This was orthodox Kasumigaseki-style (i.e. bureaucratic-style) diplomacy. In truth, Shidehara had his own way of considering domestic and foreign public opinion.
One clear example of his concern would be his publishing of diplomatic documents at the time of the enactment of the Japanese Exclusion Act. Nevertheless, he always kept his distance when it came to dealing with the press.

Meanwhile, when the Kenseikai entrusted Japan’s diplomacy to Shidehara and thereby gained the trust of Saionji, the last of the genrō of the Meiji era, it gained recognition as a legitimate governing party. As a result, democratisation via a two-party system made considerable progress during the 1920s. As the successor to the Kenseikai, the Minseitō would eventually surpass the Seiyūkai. However, it should be noted that the Kenseikai cabinet’s very dependency upon Shidehara entailed a certain eschewing of party-based guidance of diplomacy. While the party did gain Saionji’s trust by leaving diplomatic decision-making to Shidehara, the next phase should have included a consideration of how political parties could involve themselves in this sphere. When Shidehara himself had a sense of impending crisis over the Tanaka cabinet’s policies on China, he began to lean more openly towards supporting the Minseitō. While he never joined the party, he did participate in activities such as the making of public statements on Minseitō foreign policy. When Prime Minister Hamaguchi was shot, Shidehara even took the role of acting prime minister.

By all rights, as the political parties became increasingly influential in national politics, there should have been a concurrent expansion of their leadership into the sphere of foreign affairs. In practice, Prime Minister Hamaguchi welcomed this new stage of party politics at the time of the London Naval Conference on Disarmament. Yet, to a significant extent, this attitude was due to Hamaguchi’s particular nature as a party politician. By comparison, Prime Minister Wakatsuki was quite powerless during the Manchurian Incident. Ultimately, the prewar party politics of Japan was unable to respond adequately to the aftermath of this incident, leading to its collapse. The greatest tragedy of ‘Taishō democracy’ is that, when the Manchurian Incident occurred, the political parties had yet to systematise the steering of diplomatic policy. For Shidehara as well, it was a time of continuous adversity.

Yet, eventually, Shidehara would become prime minister during the occupation and later serve as speaker of the House of Representatives. At this time, he further contemplated the nature of diplomacy and democracy, and the relationship between the two. In the prewar era,
Shidehara thought it only natural that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should take the lead in foreign affairs. After the war, he began to recognise that the governing party had a role to play as well. Thus, Shidehara’s stance gradually evolved. Indeed, Shidehara even participated directly in the rebirth of party politics. He had expressed pride in Japan’s own prewar ‘democratic currents’ and had persuaded MacArthur that the nation should be allowed to further develop its own ‘Japanese-style democracy’. As a party politician, he had also worked to help stabilise the domestic situation by promoting a ‘conservative coalition’.

However, just as in the prewar era, the opposition continued to turn diplomatic affairs into political capital. Public opinion and mass media also played a role here. Vexed by this state of affairs, and with an eye towards the future conclusion of peace negotiations, Shidehara turned in his final years to championing nonpartisan diplomacy. What he meant by nonpartisan diplomacy was that parties would abstain from attempting to make political capital out of diplomatic problems. To promote this ideal, Shidehara spoke with, and tried to persuade, members of both ruling and opposition parties. Nonetheless, for opposition parties such as the Socialist Party, diplomatic problems were material to be used for criticising the ruling party. Such parties had no reason to readily abandon their involvement in diplomatic problems. In particular, the futility of asking the Socialist Party to embrace nonpartisan diplomacy revealed the limits of Shidehara’s approach. Shidehara presumably felt the sting of this failure quite deeply. The mass media and public opinion were also quite critical of the foreign policy of the wider government and the ruling party, with deeply rooted support for a comprehensive peace treaty and for future demilitarised neutrality.

Therefore, the potential for realising the kind of nonpartisan diplomacy envisaged by Shidehara was actually extremely limited. This was because of the various assumptions that it depended upon. For example, a certain degree of maturity was required not only from the opposition party but also from the citizens of the nation and the mass media. The model for Shidehara’s diplomatic ideals in this case was the UK. The reality, however, was that conditions in Japan remained a far cry from those in the UK. Indeed, far from embracing nonpartisan diplomacy, in postwar Japan the Socialist Party and other factions turned foreign policy into an ideological battleground. Shidehara’s disappointment can well be imagined. What anguished him was the conflict that arose from attempting to reconcile diplomatic stability with democracy. This was the central dilemma of
Shidehara diplomacy. It should be noted that the Socialist Party would gradually move further away from becoming a potential ruling party, going in the opposite direction from the prewar Kenseikai. Perhaps ironically, this development would actually contribute to the stability of postwar diplomacy.

In the early spring of 1951, when he was 78, Shidehara’s life ended peacefully. He did not live long enough to see Japanese politics reach maturity. Although Shidehara was unable to achieve nonpartisan diplomacy during his lifetime, his pursuit of nonpartisan diplomacy under party politics at the end of his life left a legacy worth considering in Japanese politics.