

Konoe Fumimaro
and the Failure of Peace
in Japan, 1937–1941

*A Critical Appraisal of the
Three-Time Prime Minister*

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Konoe's First Cabinet

When Konoe accepted the Imperial Order to become Prime Minister, he was at the prime of his life. He enjoyed popularity and support from literally every segment of society. Tired and apprehensive about the endless political turmoil and the uncertainty of the direction in which Japan was heading, the nation was anxious to have a new leader, someone different and fresh who might be able to pull the nation together. In the eyes of the nation, Konoe was ideally fitted to fulfill such a national need. His status as one of the most distinguished court nobles, his well-acknowledged high intelligence, even his physical appearance (he was unusually tall for an Asian, over six feet), and most significantly, his indifference to any political ambition and fame made Konoe so unconventional, fresh, and attractive as a politician. In short, Japan found a desperately needed sense of security and hope in having Konoe as a leader.

It was Konoe, however, who, more than anyone else, knew that such high expectations placed on him were closer to an illusion than reality. As discussed in the previous chapter, although Konoe had an insightful grasp of the internal and external state of the nation, considering the enormity of the task and also the self-acknowledged unfitness of his character for politics, he himself knew that he fell short in terms of the capacity to fulfill the obligations of being Prime Minister.¹

Facing an Imperial Order for the second time, however, it was his fate to accept it. He began to select the members of his cabinet. The Minister of the Army, Sugiyama Gen, and the Minister of the Navy, Yonai Mitsimasa, remained in office as Konoe desired. Konoe also wanted the Minister of Finance, Yuijo Toyotaro, to do the same. Facing the strong request of the army to appoint Baba Eiichi as Minister of Finance, Konoe reluctantly allowed Baba to be a member of the cabinet, not as Minister of Finance but as Home Minister. Yuijo protested against Baba's membership in the cabinet and resigned. In the end, a Vice Minister of Finance, Kaya Okinori, became Finance Minister.² With regard to selecting a Foreign Minister, Konoe strongly desired to have former Prime Minister

Hirota for the position. Konoe believed that Hirota, possessing characteristics to be a fine politician, such as tenacity, ambition, and shrewdness, could play the role of making up for his weaknesses and could also serve as his successor in case of his unexpected resignation.³ At first, Hirota hesitated to take the position. In the end, he gave in to the resoluteness of Konoe and Saionji. Another notable appointee, Kazami Akira, became the chief secretary of the cabinet. He was quite appealing to the public because of his personality and unorthodox political style.

Overall, the forming of Konoe's cabinet went smoothly. The only exception was his decision to have Baba as Home Minister. Considering Baba's pro-army style of financing and his unpopularity over his notorious financial policy under Hirota's cabinet, Konoe avoided selecting Baba as Finance Minister. Nonetheless, by having Baba as Home Minister, Konoe's cabinet still faced the army utilizing Baba as a source of influence on Konoe's governing. In fact, in selecting the head of the Planning Board, a position almost equivalent to Vice Premier, Konoe encountered the army's challenge to having Home Minister Baba hold concurrently the position of the head of the Planning Board.⁴ It was fortunate for Konoe's cabinet that Hirota agreed to take the position while serving as Foreign Minister. Thus, Konoe managed to avoid some potentially dire consequences. Still, over this episode of the Baba controversy, Konoe could not escape a minor setback. The national enthusiasm over having Konoe as a Premier was somewhat diminished.

On June 4, 1937, four days after Konoe's reception of the Imperial Order, his newly appointed cabinet was inaugurated. Right after the inauguration ceremony, Konoe announced his basic plan of governing. In it, he stated, "If we continue to be in discord domestically, the international community will see us worthy of contempt. I would like to mitigate the discord as much as possible. It is desired that, by restraining ourselves, each one of us tries to reduce conflict over interests, favoritism, and factionalism. To some extent, it is unavoidable to have conflict because of differences in the perception of our time. If we, however, without being self-centered, seriously and deeply examine both international and national circumstances we face today and keep talking to one another, we will be able to avoid any drastic conflict. I would not say that you should minimize conflict by totally being selfless. Considering today's situation, I think the cabinet has to take appropriate leadership. My broad and extensive visions are, externally, to establish true peace based on international justice and, internally, to carry out policies and set up institutions based on socialist ideas."⁵

As this statement indicates, Konoe believed that his ultimate task as



The ministers of Konoe's Sugiyama, Navy Minister Hirota. Konoe's first cabinet.

a premier was to achieve government and the military achievement would be indicated in his article "Realization of world peace through"

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The ministers of Konoe's first cabinet. In front and from right, Army Minister Sugiyama, Navy Minister Yonai, Prime Minister Konoe, and Foreign Minister Hirota. Konoe's first cabinet was inaugurated in June 1937 (© Mainichi Photo Bank).

a premier was to achieve an elimination of the discord between the government and the military. It was upon the consideration that only such an achievement would make it possible for Japan to establish what he advocated in his article "Reject the Anglo-American-Centered Peace," a creation of world peace truly based on international justice.

It was a formidable task. As Konoe recalled in his postwar memoir, *Ushinawareshi Seiji*, by the time Konoe announced the basic policy of his first cabinet, the army's political interference had markedly increased.⁶ There was no longer Kodo-ha as a factional rival to Tosei-ha in the Army, and, if any attempt to appoint a member of Kodo-ha as Army Minister was made, it went nowhere because of the revived practice of choosing the Army Minister from among active army generals. Accordingly, the Army Minister was someone above the authority of the cabinet. He existed only to announce army policy as national policy and, hence, literally controlled the matter of life or death for the cabinet. Konoe was obliged to realize that, not being able to know where the army policy was coming from, his cabinet was destined to be manipulated by the shadow of the Supreme Command.

Understandably, Konoe was eager to obtain a national pardon for the convicted plotters of the February Twenty-six Incident. Despite his effort, Konoe's attempt to restore the Kodo-ha caused nothing but political com-