

The Racial Equality Proposal and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

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Abstract

Who came up with the idea for the racial equality proposal, and what was its objective? It is often said that although the idea was originally based on principle, it later became entangled with real-life political interests owing to the immigration issue. Ultimately, according to this interpretation, it became an issue of national pride. Once Japan had put forward the proposal it became difficult to back down, and there was the worry that it would earn the disdain of surrounding countries, particularly China. But looking over these materials again for this presentation, I have come to think that in fact it was always the intention that this proposal should contribute to solving the immigration problem. I do not think this was incorporated along the way as a reaction to realpolitik interests. At the same time, the theoretical objective based on principle was something that the Japanese side pursued consistently throughout, even if it did not outweigh the practical concerns over the immigration issue. The idea that the national prestige became an important concern in the final stages is not, I think, something that is supported by the documentary materials. This presentation discusses how the idea for the racial equality proposal evolved, organizing the discussion around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

The questions I want to discuss today are: Who came up with the idea for the racial equality proposal, and what was its objective? I want to organize my discussion around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Professor Nakanishi has already spoken about the political circumstances related to this issue in Japan, so I would like to add my own remarks as supplementary information that will perhaps complement what we have already heard on the subject.¹

1. The Originator: Whose Idea Was It?

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a Peace Preparation Committee in October 1915, around one year after the start of World War I. The committee compiled a report a year later, at the end of 1916. Of course, US President Wilson had not yet issued his Fourteen Points, and there was no discussion about a possible racial equality proposal at this stage. Presumably discussions took place within the ministry after Wilson's Fourteen Points were announced in January 1918, but we know little about the content of these discussions, assuming they took place. We can surmise that serious deliberations began in earnest around October the same year, after Germany

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¹ For more details on the keynote speech of Professor Nakanishi, see, Nakanishi Hiroshi, "Japan at the Paris Peace Conference," *Japan Review* 3. 3-4 (Winter / Spring 2020), pp. 1-8.

accepted the Fourteen Points and arranged a ceasefire.

In Japan, there had been a change of government not long before this, with a new cabinet led by Hara Takashi replacing Terauchi Masatake at the end of September. A month and a half later, Minister for Foreign Affairs Uchida Yasuya presented a government opinion on the Fourteen Points at the Diplomatic Advisory Council. This comprised five items, one of which related to the League of Nations. This is labeled as Document 1 in the References. In fact, this was submitted on November 13, and on the very same day, the Second Peace Preparation Committee was launched inside the Foreign Ministry. It seems likely that this government opinion was not formulated at meetings of the Peace Preparation Committee within the ministry.

This document is frequently quoted in studies of the period. It suggests a clear connection between the racial equality proposal and the question of joining the League of Nations. The League of Nations was the hardest of Wilson's Fourteen Points to understand. When and where did research and discussions about the League of Nations begin within the context of Wilson's Fourteen Points, and how were these brought together in the form of this document? Unfortunately, the truth is that we do not really know. Who was in charge of the matter within the ministry? Foreign Minister Uchida, Prime Minister Hara, or someone else altogether? Shidehara Kijūrō, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, was responsible for issues relating to the peace, so it is possible that he took the lead in discussions, but the reality is that we do not really know for sure.

2. Objective (For What Purpose?)

(1) The Three Main Directions for Peace Talks

Events developed and preparations got underway for the peace conference in Paris. In December, Japan's Foreign Minister Uchida issued guidelines on the government's basic policy to a delegation of plenipotentiaries to the peace conference. This is Document 2 in the References. In it, the conditions for the peace negotiations were divided into three groups: first, issues on which Japan had its own interests, second, issues where Japan did not have any interests, and third, issues on which it shared interests with other countries. The document said: "... regarding the proposals put forward by the President of the United States, our policy will be decided according to Appendix No. 3." This was a government opinion on the Fourteen Points, part of which you have as Document 1. In other words, the document that Uchida had submitted to the Diplomatic Advisory Council ended up being incorporated more or less verbatim into the government's policy guidelines.

As you will see if you look again at Document 1, the government wanted to put off the question of establishing the League of Nations for the time being and leave as a topic to be addressed in the future. But there was the possibility that it might be approved immediately, and in that case Japan would have no choice but to take part. If that happened, Japan was to work to gain appropriate guarantees to eradicate disadvantages arising from racial prejudice.

On the face of that, perhaps Japan could have been satisfied with the situation: after the peace conference started, Japan was one of the Big Five powers, and was guaranteed—at least formally—a position of equality together with Great Britain, the United States, France, and Italy. And in fact, when Japan argued on behalf of the racial equality proposal, some people did respond by pointing out that Japan was being treated equally as a major power at the peace conference, and wasn't that enough?

(2) Makino's Negotiations

The de facto head of Japan's delegation of plenipotentiaries at the peace conference was Makino Nobuaki, although he was officially second-in-charge. As Professor Nakanishi touched on in his talk earlier, Makino tried to increase the chances of getting the racial equality proposal adopted

as part of the Covenant of the League of Nations by trying to persuade Edward House, the presidential advisor who was sometimes described as the brains of the president. He discussed this approach in his memoirs. Excerpt can be found in the References (Document 3).

Makino's memoirs were published after the war. This part was added later, reprinted intact from his older book that had been written before the war. Reading it now, one is struck by the lofty ideals. What is particularly interesting perhaps is that in his attempt to persuade House to back Japan's proposal, he draws on the idea of what we would now recognize as the logic of collective security. The logic of his argument was that it was unthinkable for a country experiencing racial discrimination to have to shoulder the burden of a military commitment to other member nations while being the victim of racial discrimination itself. In terms of the diplomatic record, this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Makino actually did say this to House. But Makino did use the argument of collective security in his addresses to the Commission on the League of Nations and at the plenary session of the peace conference, albeit in slightly vaguer terms, to argue on behalf of Japan's racial equality proposal.

House acknowledged what Makino said about wanting to incorporate a racial equality clause into the Covenant of the League of Nations. As we saw in Professor Nakanishi's PowerPoint presentation earlier, House suggested that Makino should remove from the idea he had presented those aspects relating to the immigration issue. Following this, the Japanese government presented to the Commission on the League of Nations a draft proposal, which you can see in Document 4. The wording differs somewhat from that suggested to House. At least the way I read it, however, some of the nuances relating to immigration still can be discerned in this version of the document.

Yoshida Shigeru, who also accompanied the mission, wrote in his memoirs in later years that Makino had experienced great difficulties during his time as foreign minister owing to actions taken to exclude Japanese immigrants from California. This is something that Professor Nakanishi touched on in his presentation. Yoshida speculates that this experience may have lain at the root of what led Makino to write this proposal the way he did. Also, as we heard earlier, there were petitions from people within the country and overseas, particularly from groups representing immigrant interests, and this too may have had an influence.

Again, if we think about this without our usual preconceptions, is it likely that this draft proposal for inclusion in the covenant of the League came directly from the government opinion laid out in Document 1 in the References? I keep referring back to Professor Nakanishi's presentation—once again, it is possible that this relates to something that was discussed at the Diplomatic Advisory Council. We do not know who was responsible for the draft. It does not seem to have been included in the policy guidance from the ministry. It seems likely that Makino or someone close to him wrote it. Since there is no evidence that the government opposed the draft when it received this report, I think it is safe to conclude that this was a kind of unspoken understanding in the Japanese government at the time.

Another interesting point is that Makino and the other Japanese plenipotentiaries did not try to obtain the support of smaller or less powerful countries to make the racial equality proposal a reality. They also did not do anything through the mass media. It might be more accurate to say that they did not do anything very proactive at all. Their efforts were focused on gaining the understanding of the major powers. A little later I think we will hear from Professor Kawashima about the response to the proposal in China.² Essentially, Japan seems to have avoided making any overtures to China or any of the lesser powers. It is enough to make you suspect that they deliberately avoided making efforts in this direction because they felt it would only make matters

² For more details, see, Kawashima Shin, "Chinese and Taiwanese Perspectives on Japan's Racial Equality Proposal," *Japan Review* 3. 3-4 (Winter / Spring 2020), pp. 1–10.

more complicated and more difficult in the long run if they did.

(3) Withdrawal (Abandoning the Proposal)

As you know, Japan's attempt to have a racial equality clause included in the League of Nations covenant ultimately ended in failure. Japan later tried to have the essence of the proposal (Document 5 in the References) included in the preamble of the covenant, but this was not a success either, as we heard in the explanation from Professor Nakanishi.

The question then naturally arose: What should be done about this? The question seems to have prompted fierce debate within the delegation of plenipotentiaries. We know this from an account (Document 6 in the References) in the memoirs of Kimura Eiichi. I'm quoting this at secondhand from another source, but it's quite interesting so I decided to include it anyway. Kimura Eiichi was also a member of the Peace Preparation Committee within the Foreign Ministry I mentioned earlier, and served as deputy secretary within the delegation.

It is hard to grasp just by reading it once, but I think probably the sense of it was this. He seems to be saying that since the attempt to get the proposal included in the preamble was unsuccessful, there was a suggestion that Japan should try again later at a plenary session of the allied nations, or formally the plenary session of the preliminary peace conference. The idea was to try again to get at least the essence of the proposal included in the preamble to the covenant of the League when the preliminary peace conference was held. And when this was not a success, he recalls, there were some people who thought that Japan should reexamine its intentions and put off joining the League.

An opposing argument seems to have emerged from the younger contingent within the group, the younger diplomats and accompanying personnel. These people argued that the wording of the proposal for inclusion in the preamble was sufficiently ambiguous and compromised already. They argued that Japan should abandon ineffectual measures to rehash the issue and resubmit the proposal only to see it rebuffed again. Instead, they said, Japan should move forward positively, join the League and propose the issue in the future from within the League. In response to this opposition, the head of the mission Saionji Kinmochi and his deputy Makino Nobuaki abandoned the idea of resubmitting the proposal at the plenary session of the peace conference.

Unfortunately, we do not have supplementary evidence to support this anecdote, so we cannot be sure to what extent it is factually correct. But if we look at what happened later, elements emerge that match with the account at least to a certain extent. For example, Makino did give a speech at the plenary session, expressing regret that the racial equality proposal had not been approved. In that speech, however, he did not use the phrasing of Document 5, originally proposed for inclusion in the preamble and criticized from within the delegation for being vague and conciliatory. Instead, he again used the wording from Document 4, which Japan had originally tried to get incorporated into the main body of the League of Nations covenant. The government's instructions also seem to suggest that the draft proposal put forward for inclusion in the preamble had been a little vague.

The prime minister when the proposal failed to get passed was Hara Takashi; his decision can be found in Document 7 in the References. This document is often quoted, and will be familiar to many of you. His decision, essentially, was that the situation was not likely to become any worse than it had been up until now, and that the issue was not worth leaving the League of Nations over.

3. Next Actions

What happened on the issue after that? Document 8 was presumably written either immediately after the peace conference or perhaps during it, although it is unclear exactly when that was,

since the document is undated.

It is a handwritten document that explains the decision that Japan should indeed join the League of Nations. It says that although the position with regard to racially discriminatory treatment is sufficiently dangerous today, this tendency would only get worse if Japan did not join the League of Nations. The connection with the immigration issue comes out strongly again here.

On this failure of the racial equality proposal, or at least the failure to turn it into a reality, it is often said that although the idea was originally based on principle, it later became entangled with real-life political interests owing to the immigration issue. Ultimately, according to this interpretation, it became an issue of national pride. Once Japan had put forward the proposal, it became difficult to back down, and there was the worry that it would earn the disdain of surrounding countries, particularly China.

But looking over these materials again for this presentation, I have come to think that in fact it was always the intention that this proposal should contribute to solving the immigration problem. I do not think this was incorporated along the way as a reaction to realpolitik interests.

At the same time, the theoretical objective based on principle was something that the Japanese side pursued consistently throughout, even if it did not outweigh the practical concerns over the immigration issue. The idea that the national prestige became an important concern in the final stages is not, I think, something that is supported by the documentary materials.

Of course, as the account in Kimura Eiichi's memoirs makes clear, even after abandoning the plan to make the racial equality proposal a reality at the peace conference, the idea of trying again in the future after joining the League continued to survive, at least among the younger diplomats at the Foreign Ministry. Makino too, as I have said, made clear Japan's intention to raise the issue again during his speech at the plenary session of the peace conference. In fact, in the lead-up to the first General Assembly of the League of Nations, the Foreign Ministry did start preparations for that direction, but ultimately decided to scrap its plans to raise the issue. It is not clear what the reason was for this. And I am afraid I am not sure whether the Japanese delegation ever raised the issue again at the League of Nations. This is a subject that requires further research.

In the famous "Emperor's Monologue," a transcript of spoken memoirs by the Shōwa Emperor (Hirohito) about World War II, the emperor said that the failure of the racial equality proposal at the Paris Peace Conference was one of the ultimate underlying reasons for the Greater East Asian War. But in the memoirs and other writings we have by diplomats and those who took part in the conference, there are surprisingly few references to this issue. Following the failure at the peace conference, young diplomats within the Foreign Ministry formed a group calling for reforms within the ministry. But these reforms focused on the organization itself, and apparently came to an end without ever tackling the question of how the racial equality proposal should be handled in the future. There is more I could say, and much more work that needs to be done on the subject, but that is where I will leave things for today.

References

1. **Opinion of the Imperial Government on President Wilson's Fourteen Points** (presented by Foreign Minister Uchida at the Diplomatic Advisory Council on November 13, 1918)

[...]

7. Concerning the League of Nations, which is one of the most important issues, the Imperial Government approves its ultimate purpose. However, the fact that racial prejudice has not yet been extinguished among nations means that, depending on the means employed to achieve the League's goals, the possibility exists that its establishment will be gravely disadvantageous to the empire... . Therefore, it is considered advisable to work to delay agreement on a concrete proposal, limiting the scope of discussions to agreeing a draft of general aspiration, and leaving the question of how this will be implemented as an outstanding problem, with a proposal to be discussed at an appropriate future opportunity following careful consideration by the nations. However, in the event that the League of Nations does come into being, it would be unwise for Japan to be isolated outside it. If it appears that a concrete proposal for its establishment is likely to be approved, Japan should work to devise a suitable strategy to ensure as much as circumstances allow the elimination of the disadvantages arising from racial prejudice.

2. **Three Major Policy Directions for the Peace Talks** (sent from Foreign Minister Uchida to Ambassador Chinda in London on December 26, 1918)

First: Peace conditions where the empire possesses interests independently from the allied countries. [...]

Second: Peace conditions where the empire does not possess direct interests. [...]

Third: Peace conditions where the empire has interests in common with the allies.

On peace conditions where the empire has interests in common with the allied countries, and regarding the proposals put forward by the President of the United States, our policy will be decided according to Appendix No. 3; on all other issues, we should watch carefully the general tendency of negotiations and work in step with the other allied countries.

3. **Makino Nobuaki, *Memoirs*** (Chūkō Bunko edition, "On the Paris Peace Conference," originally published in *Shōtō kandan*)

We argued that given the founding spirit of the League of Nations, and with a view to its healthy development in the future, it would be difficult to secure widespread trust unless it were built on a foundation of racial equality. If following an invasion of one country by another the covenant required signatory countries to come together to repel an invasion, this would potentially require nations to use military force to defend the invaded country. This would involve a heavy burden indeed for countries that were subject to racial discrimination, and in the case of joint military operations, might even mean that a country would be required to step in as an ally to even a country that was discriminating against it racially. As things stood, it would be difficult for a country that was being discriminated against to make military sacrifices in the cause of aiding the League, and we therefore submitted a proposal arguing

that it was only natural to recognize racial equality, at least in principle.

4. Racial Equality Proposal Draft (presented by Japan to the Commission on the League of Nations on February 13, 1919)

The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord as soon as possible to all alien nationals of states, members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.

5. Draft Proposal for Insertion in Preamble (prepared by Japan on April 11, 1919)

by the endorsement of the principle of equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals

6. Kimura Eiichi, *Sekai taisen to Gaiko* [The World War and Diplomacy], (quoted from *Matsuoka Yōsuke: sono hito to shōgai*)

Although the Commission on the League of Nations had initially approved the proposal by a majority, at a meeting the following day the situation changed and a majority voted against the proposal. A nighttime meeting of the plenipotentiaries was immediately called, and opinion settled into two adamantly opposed groups, between a hardline faction who insisted that Japan should refuse to join the League or use a refusal to sign a treaty as a bargaining-chip, if the racial equality proposal were rejected, and opposing them another group who argued that it was unthinkable for Japan to bear sole responsibility for a failure to make the League of Nations a reality for the sake of a compromised and perfunctory insistence on racial issues. In addition, the group of young diplomats felt that pushing ahead with a compromised proposal of this kind would only damage Japan's interests without bringing any advantages, and that therefore Japan should declare its readiness before the world to swallow its pride and abandon the issue for now out of a wish to see the League of Nations become a reality, while leaving room for the possibility of proposing a more thorough-going, purer racial equality clause on another occasion in the future. Opinion divided between the older and the younger members of the delegation, and it seemed impossible to see how any decision could ever be arrived at. Then Prince Saionji, who had been listening in silence all this time, suddenly turned to Baron Makino and said suggestively:

“Makino-san, is it not the case sometimes in *go* that one can have the better strategy but still lose the game.” Suddenly Makino, who until now had been listening thoughtfully, spoke up, saying: “Kimura-san, I want you to write up a clear explanation of the case for giving up the racial issue. And Matsuoka-san, write a statement in English for me to deliver before the committee tomorrow.” And with these straightforward orders the matter was decided in an instant.

7. *The Diary of Hara Takashi* (dated March 30, 1919)

Itō and the others agreed that this issue was not sufficient for us to withdraw from the League of Nations, and that as a result even if we did not press ahead with our proposal, the situation was unlikely to become worse than it is at present. Therefore, if we could maintain our face, that would be acceptable.

8. Report on the League of Nations Problem (Conclusion) (Position of the Empire's Plenipotentiaries with Regard to the Problem)

[...]

3. Seeing that the problem of racially discriminatory treatment is already on a dangerous tendency today, the empire must expect that being isolated outside the League of Nations would only make this tendency even worse than it is at present... .