

The Montreux Conference of 1936 and the
Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Two perceptions
regarding the League of Nations after Japan's withdrawal
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This article investigates Japanese attempts to reset its political relations with the League of Nations (hereafter, the LN) after the former's withdrawal from the League, focusing on the Japanese stance at the Montreux Conference of 1936, which was held three years after Japan's withdrawal for the purpose of revising articles concerning the demilitarization of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits, first declared in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Close examination of Japanese diplomacy during the Montreux Conference indicates that its decision makers were seeking some ideal means by which to reset the country's political relations with the League throughout the mid-1930s. They were particularly sensitive towards the LN Covenant, which in their opinion appeared to offer a legal basis for imposing sanctions on any country of the world, including Japan. Such sensitivity sharpened from 1934 on after the Soviet Union joined the LN, due to the perception that the outbreak of Soviet-Japanese hostilities was highly imminent, leading to fears that the Soviets might call for the LN to impose sanctions on Japan if war did break out. These concerns are the reason why the Japanese government was very active during the Montreux Conference, in addition to regarding the Conference, which was marked by a fierce debate regarding the legal relationship between the revised treaty and the LN Covenant, as the touchstone leading to the future of Japan's diplomatic policy toward the LN.

There were two contrasting opinions within the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Gaimusho 外務省) over the stance to be taken towards the revised treaty. One line, advocated by Foreign Minister Arita Hachiro, was to attempt to block LN intervention altogether. The other, advocated by Sato Naotake, the Japanese delegate to the Montreux Conference, argued that Japan should seek

means of coexisting with the LN. In more concrete terms, Arita intended to block intervention by calling for a treaty signing congress (*teiyaku kokukaigi* 締約国会議) as a diplomatic platform opposing the LN and asserting that the text of the revised treaty should seek to avoid LN interference by separating the new convention from the LN Covenant. In opposition to Arita's assertions, Sato was prepared to partially accept "a treaty supplementary to the LN Covenant", which European members, such as the Soviet Union and France, aspired to conclude. By doing so, Sato intended to create a legal setting which would enable LN member countries and "contracting parties" (the latter including Japan) to enjoy equal standing vis-à-vis each other.

Although Sato succeeded in persuading Arita that it was necessary to reset Japan as "a state withdrawing from the LN that could coexist with the LN", the outbreak of the 2nd Sino-Japanese war about a year after the Conference resulted in sanctions being imposed on Japan by the LN, which left Japanese decision-makers with no other option but to abandon any hope of coexistence.