Japan’s Cold Warrior:
Nomura Kichisaburō and Japan’s Pre-Korean War Security, 1946–1950

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Ever since James Auer in 1971 published *The Postwar Rearmament of Japanese Maritime Forces*, historians have debated former admiral Nomura Kichisaburō’s role in the establishment of Japan’s postwar Maritime Self Defense Forces. ¹ Most historians including Auer have traced the impetus for Japan’s maritime rearmament to the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. These historians argue that over the ensuing months, Nomura together with a small group of former Imperial Japanese Navy officers was largely successful in impressing U.S. Navy officers with the need for a maritime defense for Japan. ² The principal dissenting voice appears to be that of Shibayama Futoshi, who recently called into question the relevance of Nomura’s efforts. Detailing the extent to which Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru distanced himself from Nomura, Shibayama also argued that the former admiral’s vision of a large ocean navy was entirely out of sync with the perceptions driving the United States and British governments. ³

What has been missing from this debate is an examination of the intellectual milieu in which Nomura operated in the lead-up to the outbreak of the Korean War. This essay seeks to address this shortcoming. Several questions present themselves. How did Nomura perceive the constitution’s “no war” clause? How did he react to American efforts in 1947 to end the occupation? What stance did he take toward the renewed efforts for a peace treaty in 1949? What position in the postwar world order did he envision for Japan? How, for that matter, did he perceive of the postwar world order? Did his arguments at any point matter? Were they distinct from – or were they in harmony with – arguments current in the Japanese Foreign Ministry? Or in the Department of State? Or in the Pentagon? The recent discovery of a wealth of
documentary source material in Tokyo ensures that an investigation into Nomura’s pre-Korean War movements is not only timely but possible. 4)

It becomes apparent throughout the course of this paper that Nomura’s overriding concern in the immediate postwar period rested with Japan’s national security. To this end, he revealed himself as possessed of a vision of the United States and Japan united in purpose. Far more than an expeditious response to America’s postwar position of hegemony, it was a vision rooted in Nomura’s long naval career. First brought into contact with the United States as a midshipman in 1899, Nomura served as naval attaché to the Japanese embassy in Washington throughout World War One. Left with an abiding impression of that nation’s ability to harness its unparalleled commercial and industrial power in an era of total war, Nomura informed his naval colleagues upon his return to Tokyo that although Japanese-American relations were “increasingly complicated,” it was imperative to “strengthen ties” and “harmonize interests” between the two nations. 5)

This belief continued unabated over the ensuing decades. Having served as Navy Minister Katō Tomosaburō’s handpicked senior aide at the Washington Conference of 1921-1922, Nomura positioned himself throughout the era of naval limitation as its unqualified supporter. After the navy in 1934 determined to withdraw from the disarmament system, Nomura refused an invitation to lead Japan’s delegation to the doomed 1935 London Naval Conference on the grounds that he was “not the right man” to announce internationally the navy’s intention to forsake the path of cooperation with its American and British counterparts. 6) Following his retirement in April 1937 from the navy’s active list, Nomura frequently weighed in on the navy’s policy debates, always seeking to solidify support for Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa’s stubborn refusal to sanction an alliance relationship with Washington’s quasi-enemy, Nazi Germany. 7) Then as foreign minister (September 1939-January 1940) and later as ambassador to the United States (November 1940-December 1941), Nomura worked tirelessly to impress upon his colleagues the necessity of a conciliatory stance toward the United States. 8) The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought Nomura’s efforts as ambassador to an abrupt halt. Neither Pearl Harbor nor the long and bitter war that followed, however, shook his belief in the necessity of postwar Japanese-American cooperation. The increasing bitterness and enmity with which the United States and the Soviet Union viewed each other from 1946, moreover, served to add an urgency—and, equally important, legitimacy—to Nomura’s views. What follows, then, is the story of Nomura's
evolution as Japan’s consummate cold warrior.

The Early Occupation Period

Nomura first took up the issue of Japan’s national security on 8 June 1946, while serving on the Privy Council’s deliberative committee on Japan’s new draft constitution. Recommending that the Privy Council approve the American-drafted document, Nomura nonetheless aired his reservations concerning its renunciation of war, as well as its unequivocal ban on the maintenance of land, sea, and air forces. Before an audience which included Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, Nomura argued that the “maintenance of peace and order in our territories and territorial waters is absolutely vital.” Taking cold comfort in the security being afforded by the occupying forces, Nomura implored his colleagues to “consider the future.” Once the occupation ended, he stressed, “Japan must possess the capacity to maintain peace and order by its own efforts.” What mattered to Nomura was not when Japan returned to independence but that its independence was defensible when it did. In short, rearmament was seen as necessary before Japan signed a peace treaty with its one-time enemies. Arguing that the maintenance of forces necessary for securing peace and order was an “altogether separate issue” from that of the maintenance of war potential, Nomura grasped for the means by which such forces might fall within the scope of the constitution. Referring specifically to the United States Coast Guard, he wondered aloud whether such forces as might be maintained “would not necessarily have to be called an army and navy.”

Nomura’s arguments met with Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru’s immediate disavowal. “While the occupation forces remain, they will take care of [Japan’s security],” Yoshida stated. “I will make the best of the situation after the occupation has ended.” Whatever his personal views on the matter, Yoshida’s argument for post-peace treaty rearmament was more clearly rooted in occupation realities than was Nomura’s case for pre-peace treaty rearmament. In what one commentator has termed “the problem of security against Japan,” Washington had long since decided that regional security necessitated Japan’s complete disarmament and demilitarization. On Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) General Douglas MacArthur’s watch, this had been achieved to a greater or lesser extent by January 1946. In a word, rearmament was clearly not an option unless and until there was a monumental shift in American policy vis-à-vis occupied Japan.