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Aspects of Romanian Japanese Relations (1917–1944). The Southeastern European Connections of an Asian Great Power*

Abstract

From the establishment of the Romanian legation in Tokyo in 1917 until the severance of diplomatic contacts in October 1944, relations between Romania and Japan went through several stages (1917–1922; 1922–1940; 1940–1944), dominated by feeble attempts to develop commercial ties and to assume a common political agenda. The most important issue on the bilateral agenda during the interwar period was the ratification by Japan of the Bessarabian Treaty, signed in October 1920. For pragmatic reasons, which were closely linked to economic and political interests between Japan and Soviet Russia, the Tokyo authorities did not ratify the treaty. This fact shows that the “Soviet factor” played an important role in Romanian Japanese relations, as they were neighbors of the USSR, whose security equation included the Soviet variable.

Keywords: Romania, Japan, diplomacy, Bessarabia, Soviet Union

Introductory Remarks

The relations between Romania and Japan could be considered as relations between two distant countries, separated not only by thousands of kilometers, but also by a major cultural gap. Japan was an Asian great power with a global scale at the end of World War I, while Romania was a European “small power”. At first glance, one can see an asymmetrical relationship between a rising great power and a state with an enlarged territory after the war, but with a complicated security equation.

Therefore, the main direction of our approach is to analyze how the interests of the two countries intersected during the period in question, focusing on the political-diplomatic and

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economic fields. We will analyze how diplomatic relations between Bucharest and Tokyo evolved, trying to explain the attitude of Romania and Japan towards the main political issue on the bilateral agenda: the ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty. At the same time, we will also focus on how the Romanian state reacted to the Manchurian crisis (1931–1933), but we will also discuss some attempts to stimulate the fragile economic ties between the two countries.

Even if there had been contacts since the second half of the 19th century between the Royal House of Romania and the Imperial House of Japan, the distance and the low commercial interest meant that only in 1902 did the first attempts to establish diplomatic relations take place, by trying to sign, according to the Japanese point of view, a Treaty of Settlement, trade and navigation, but without any initiatives materializing. At that time, Romania had no diplomatic mission outside Europe, while Japan had diplomatic offices in Romania's great neighboring powers: the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire.

First Stage: the Beginning of Diplomatic Relations

The Great War created the ground for establishing diplomatic relations between Romania and Japan. Being on the same political and military side, contacts between Romania and Japan increased in the first year after Romania's entry into the war in August 1916. The Romanian leaders decided, out of political, economic and military necessity, to open a series of diplomatic missions within this framework. In addition to setting up legations in the Scandinavian states, the decision was taken to establish diplomatic missions in Washington and Tokyo¹.

It was Romania's initiative this time, seeking support from the Allied states in the context of the difficult military and economic situation in 1917. As Japan was the only major power fighting against the Central Powers with whom Romania did not have direct diplomatic relations, Romanian Japanese diplomatic relations were established on 19 November 1917 with the setting up of the Romanian legation in Tokyo². The sudden death (in December 1917) of the Romanian plenipotentiary minister sent to Japan meant that this political gesture had no effect on relations between the two states. Moreover, the Japanese side did not even recognize the ephemeral Romanian diplomatic mission in the "Land of the Rising Sun" as the moment when diplomatic relations were established³.

Romanian Japanese contacts intensified in the context of the Paris Peace Conference. The most important moment, with lasting effects on relations between Bucharest and Tokyo, was the signing by Japan, together with Romania, Great Britain, France and Italy, of the

¹ A.-B. Ceobanu, *Continuitate vs. discontinuitate: plenipotențiarii români în timpul Primului Război Mondial*, in: *România și statele vecine la începutul Primului Război Mondial. Viziuni, percepții, interpretări*, F. Solomon, A. Cușco, M.-Ș. Ceaușu (eds.), Iași 2016, pp. 125–129; *Diplomați români în vreme de război (1914–1918). Catalog*, C. Botoșineanu et al. (coord.), Iași 2017, pp. 85–91.

² I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații România-Japonia*, București 2013, pp. 93–94; A.-B. Ceobanu, *Continuitate vs. discontinuitate...*, pp. 128–129.

³ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 26–27.

Treaty of Paris (Bessarabia Treaty of 28 October 1920)⁴, which recognized Bessarabia as part of the Romanian state⁵. As the treaty came into force only after ratification by all the signatory states, obtaining Japan's ratification was a major item on the agenda of bilateral relations.

It was in this context that Crown Prince Carol visited Japan in June–July 1920. The moment was used by both sides to propose the establishment of legations in Bucharest and Tokyo and to initiate trade relations. The Romanians wanted to buy locomotives, ships, pharmaceuticals, which they wanted to pay for with treasury bonds guaranteed by the Romanian state or through the exchange of goods⁶. The Romanians were also interested in purchasing cotton fabrics also through treasury bonds guaranteed by the Romanian state, which were to be paid by Japanese banks⁷. There was greater interest on the part of the Romanian leaders, who, faced with financial problems and major security threats, sought to exploit possible collaboration with Japan, a great power with confirmed status at the Peace Conference.

In a context when Romania established a series of diplomatic missions in Europe in 1920–1921, the government in Bucharest decided to open a legation in Tokyo. Although the measure was adopted in September 1920⁸, the legation began operating in June 1921. In March 1922, Japan established a legation in the Romanian capital⁹, which was important because it was the first diplomatic mission established by the Japanese state in South-East Europe. Japan had also established diplomatic relations with Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1919, then, in 1921, it did the same with Hungary, and two years later, in 1923, with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The last country in the region with which Japan established diplomatic relations was Bulgaria in 1939¹⁰. However, although Japan had diplomatic relations with Greece before the First World War, it was not until 1922 that it opened a legation in Athens¹¹, while Japanese legations were established in Czechoslovakia in October 1921¹², Hungary in 1938¹³ and Bulgaria in 1939¹⁴. The Japanese legation

⁴ For the text of the treaty see: Document 1, *Treaty on the recognition of the union of Bessarabia with Romania, Paris, 28 October 1920*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940). Studiu și documente*, I. Șișcanu, Gh.E. Cojocaru (eds.), Chișinău 2021, pp. 72–76.

⁵ Japan signed the treaty on October 30, 1920, as the other states signed on October 28 (V.-F. Dobrinescu, *România și sistemul tratatelor de pace de la Paris (1919–1923)*, Iași 1993, p. 76).

⁶ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 28, 114–118, 243; C. Găvănescul, *Ocolul pământului în șapte luni și o zi. Călătorie făcută cu A.S.R. Principele Carol, fostul Moștenitor al Tronului*, vol. V: *Japonia (20 iunie–8 iulie)*, Turnu-Severin [1926], pp. 69–95.

⁷ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 243.

⁸ *Organizarea instituțională a Ministerului Afacerilor Externe. Acte și documente*, vol. II: 1920–1947, I. Mamina et al. (eds.), București 2006, p. 549.

⁹ M. Epure, *Din Carpați până la Fuji*, București 2000, pp. 73–74; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 28.

¹⁰ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 111.

¹¹ N. Misawa, *The crisis between Greece and Japan immediately after WWI: the Japanese policy to advance to the Mediterranean World*, “Mediterranean World” 2017, vol. 23, p. 123.

¹² Establishing of diplomatic relations and interwar development between Czechoslovak Republic and Japan, https://www.mzv.cz/tokyo/en/bilateral_relations/establishing_of_diplomatic_relations_and.html (date accessed: 14.11.2023).

¹³ M.I. Farkas, *The Hungarian Nippon Society*, “Journal of East Asian Cultures”, 2022, vol. 1, p. 97.

¹⁴ E. Kandilarov, “Bulgarians are the Japanese on the Balkans”: *Bulgarians through the lens of Japanese in three different historical epochs*, in: *Japan and European Southeast. Over a hundred years of political, economic, cultural and academic interactions*, E. Kandilarov, M. Dimitrov (eds.), Sofia 2021, p. 17.

in Bucharest also represented the Japanese state in its relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, as the two states had not opened diplomatic missions in their capitals¹⁵. Thus, the Japanese legation in Bucharest was the diplomatic mission through which the Japanese state was directly connected to the Balkan issue, but also watched, from a certain angle, over the Black Sea area and the neighborhood with Soviet Russia, while the legation in Athens was one of Japan's connection points to the Mediterranean region¹⁶.

However, by a decision of the Romanian government (in March 1922), in April 1922, the legation in Tokyo, together with other diplomatic missions and consular offices, were closed for financial reasons¹⁷. We note that Tokyo was the most important capital where Romania closed its diplomatic mission in 1922. Until April 1927, when the legation in Japan was re-established, Romanian Japanese relations were mainly mediated by the Japanese diplomatic mission in Bucharest¹⁸.

During this period, another area of interference developed between the two countries, in terms of multilateral diplomacy, given the two countries' membership of the League of Nations. For example, Japan's representative in Geneva, Mineichirō Adachi, was involved in 1923 and later in the mediation of the Romanian-Hungarian dispute over the Hungarian optants and in the settlement of petitions sent to the League of Nations by representatives of the Romanian minorities¹⁹.

The Issue of the Ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty: between Passivity and Practical Actions

The issue of the ratification of the 1920 Treaty and, in a subsidiary way, the topic of the Soviet danger, were the most important items on the bilateral agenda. As has been appreciated in historiography, the issue of the ratification of the October 1920 treaty in Romanian Japanese relations went through three major stages (1920–1927, 1927–1932, 1933–1940), being closely related to the ratification of the document by the European signatory states, to the functioning of the Romanian legation in Tokyo and to the attitude of the Soviet Union²⁰.

¹⁵ N. Shiba, *A new-formed state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Japan in the early interwar period: focusing on the question of the recognition of the new state*, in: *Japan and European Southeast...*, pp. 86–90.

¹⁶ N. Misawa, *The crisis between...*, pp. 123–127.

¹⁷ V. Urum, *Tokyo*, in: *Reprezentanțele diplomatice ale României*, vol. II: 1911–1939, București 1971, pp. 126–127.

¹⁸ N. Dascălu, *Relații româno-japoneze în perioada interbelică (1919–1939)*, in: *Românii în istoria universală*, I. Agrigoroaiei, Gh. Buzatu, V. Cristian (eds.), II/1, Iași 1987, p. 305.

¹⁹ A. Berkes, *The League of Nations and the Optants' Dispute in the Hungarian Borderlands: Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia*, in: *Remaking Central Europe. The League of Nations and the Former Habsburg Lands*, P. Becker, N. Wheatley (eds.), Oxford 2020, pp. 303–304.

²⁰ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova: a Romanian province under Russian rule. Diplomatic history from the archives of the great powers*, New York 2002, p. 270.

After the ratification of the treaty by Great Britain (16 April 1922) and Romania (7 and 13 April 1922)²¹, the Bucharest authorities took steps to obtain ratification by the Japanese Parliament, in the context in which, in March 1924, the French National Assembly and Senate ratified the Treaty of October 1920²².

This is the context in which, in October 1923, the Romanian Foreign Minister, I.G. Duca, requested the plenipotentiary minister of Japan in Bucharest, Genshiro Nishi, to make approaches to the government in Tokyo for the ratification of the treaty²³, and in April 1924, the Romanian leaders addressed the Japanese ambassador in Paris on the same subject²⁴. Two other elements were at the basis of the Romanian government's actions. On the one hand, the failure of a new round of negotiations with the Soviets, held in Vienna between 27 March and 2 April 1924, confirmed to the Romanian leaders that it was extremely complicated to reach an agreement with the Soviets, including the recognition of the integration of Bessarabia into the Romanian state²⁵. On the other hand, between 2 and 6 April 1924, Prince Higashikuni Naruhito visited Romania, having meetings with King Ferdinand and Prime Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu, but also with the Foreign Minister and other important Romanian officials²⁶. Even though there has been speculation in the Romanian press about discussing the issue of the ratification of the 1920 treaty, there is no documentary evidence to confirm such a hypothesis. However, the official visit of an important representative of the Japanese Imperial House brought the issue of Romanian Japanese relations back to the attention of public opinion and decision-makers in Bucharest.

However, the leaders in Tokyo did not follow up the Bucharest initiative, as Japanese diplomacy was preoccupied with negotiations to normalize relations with the Soviet Union. The Japanese told the Romanians that they would consider ratification once the European signatory states had ratified the treaty. Japanese diplomats felt they should not set the tone in a "European affair"²⁷. With such an attitude, Japan kept a trump card both in its relations with the USSR and with Romania.

Nevertheless, in Romanian and international historiography, different views are expressed about the attitude of the decision-makers in Bucharest towards Japan's ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty in the first interwar decade. Some historians consider that the Romanian leaders missed a "historic opportunity", as Soviet Russia was internationally isolated in the early 1920s, and the Tokyo government could have been persuaded diplomatically to ratify the treaty²⁸. The fact that Romania did not maintain a legation in Tokyo between 1922 and 1927 is presented in historiography as a strategic error of the Bucharest

²¹ I. Șișcanu, Gh.E. Cojocaru, *Japonia și ratificarea Tratatul Basarabiei, din 28 octombrie 1920*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)*..., p. 19.

²² Gh.E. Cojocaru, *Disputa sovieto-română de la Viena (27 martie–2 aprilie 1924)*, Chișinău 2018, pp. 82–90.

²³ Document 2, *Telegram of the Romanian Foreign Minister, I.G. Duca, to the head of the Japanese legation in Bucharest, G. Nishi, 26 October 1923*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)*..., pp. 76–77.

²⁴ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova*..., pp. 277–278; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații*..., p. 30.

²⁵ Gh.E. Cojocaru, *Disputa sovieto-română*..., pp. 157–217.

²⁶ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații*..., pp. 137–149.

²⁷ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova*..., p. 276.

²⁸ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații*..., pp. 28–29; Ion Șișcanu, Gheorghe E. Cojocaru, *Japonia și ratificarea*..., pp. 23–25; N. Dascălu, *Relații româno-japoneze*..., pp. 305–306; R. Carp, *Recunoașterea Unirii Basarabiei cu România – aspecte istorice și de drept internațional*, "Polis" December 2017–February 2018, vol. VI, No. 1 (19), p. 11.

authorities, who did not fully understand the importance of close relations with Japan²⁹. On the other hand, other authors consider that the Romanian government and diplomatic service were in a hurry to negotiate the October 1920 treaty, which contained certain clauses that could have been modified to the advantage of the Romanian state³⁰.

From our point of view, the attitude of the leaders in Bucharest can be understood differently. The Romanian government led by General Alexandru Averescu, with Take Ionescu as Foreign Minister, re-established the legation in Japan after the war, in a broad action to connect Romania to the new international realities. However, Romanian diplomacy did not make any moves for Japan's ratification of the 1920 treaty because, on the one hand, it was trying to tackle this complicated issue through negotiations with Soviet Russia³¹ and, on the other hand, it expected the European signatory powers to start the ratification process. Between 1922 and 1927, the Romanian authorities considered that relations with Japan could be maintained through the Japanese legation in Bucharest, but also through connections in other capitals or in Geneva, within the League of Nations. In fact, during these five years, Romania had only one diplomatic mission outside Europe, the Washington legation³². In addition, decision-makers in Bucharest understood that, although there were points of connection on the foreign and security policy agenda of the two countries, Romania had nothing to offer Japan to convince the leaders in Tokyo to speed up the ratification process of the October 1920 Treaty. Although Romania was the South-Eastern European state that seemed to have the closest links with Japan in the first decade of the interwar period, for Tokyo, the Romanian state was only a minor piece in the complicated diplomatic arrangements for managing relations with Soviet Russia.

On the other hand, documentary evidence shows that Japan's attitude was also influenced by messages from Soviet diplomats, who believed that ratification of the treaty by the Tokyo Parliament would affect the normalization of Japanese-Soviet relations. This issue was part of the negotiating file between Japan and the USSR, which was completed with the signing of a convention and several annexed protocols on 20 January 1925³³. Within this framework, the two signatory powers exchanged secret diplomatic notes on the October 1920 treaty, from which it emerged that the Japanese would not ratify the document until it had been ratified by the European signatory powers³⁴. The Japanese were therefore not committed to giving up ratification, but neither did they have any interest in ratifying the treaty³⁵.

Once the information about the signing of a Japan-USSR Convention became public, Romanian diplomats tried to find out if the agreement between Tokyo and Moscow included ratification of the 1920 treaty. The Japanese government denied such a hypothesis, presenting the Romanians with the same message it had delivered until then: Japan was

²⁹ M. Epure, *Din Carpați...*, p. 100; V. Urum, *Tokyo*, p. 127.

³⁰ A.-M. Mironov, *Vremea încercărilor. Relațiile româno-sovietice 1930–1940*, București 2013, p. 87.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 58–77.

³² *Organizarea instituțională a Ministerului Afacerilor Externe...*, pp. 535–563.

³³ I. Șișcanu, Gh.E. Cojocaru, *Japonia și ratificarea...*, pp. 37–38.

³⁴ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova...*, pp. 283–285; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 154–157; B.A. Elleman, *International rivalry and secret diplomacy in East Asia, 1896–1950*, New York 2020, pp. 188–191.

³⁵ Japan also benefited strategically if it did not ratify the document and helped maintain tense relations between Moscow and Bucharest, as the USSR could station more troops on the Romanian border, reducing military pressure in the Far East. M. Mitrasca, *Moldova...*, p. 272.

waiting for the ratification of the treaty by all the European signatory states³⁶. Despite the reassuring Japanese discourse, the Foreign Ministry leadership in Bucharest sought to decipher Japan's policy towards the USSR, trying to obtain information from various sources. For example, the Dutch Foreign Minister was convinced that the postponement of Japan's ratification was closely linked to Japanese-Soviet relations and was part of the international policy strategy of the Tokyo leaders³⁷.

After Italy ratified the treaty in March 1927, Japan remained the last signatory power that had not done the same as the other four signatory states. In this context, the Romanian authorities re-established the legation in Tokyo in April 1927 and intensified efforts to get the Japanese to ratify the 1920 treaty. However, Aurel Ion Vasiliu, Romania's Minister Plenipotentiary to Japan, did not begin his work until November 1927³⁸. The central objective of his mission was to persuade the Japanese authorities to ratify the October 1920 treaty. The government in Bucharest, led by the leader of the National Liberal Party, Vintilă Brătianu, with the influential diplomat and politician Nicolae Titulescu at the head of the Foreign Ministry, wanted to achieve success in international politics to strengthen its political status at national level. This explains the pressure exerted on the plenipotentiary minister in Tokyo, who was asked to come up with concrete results in "defending this great national interest"³⁹. Although Vasiliu had several meetings with decision-makers in Japan, in which the main subject was the question of ratifying the 1920 treaty, his interlocutors avoided giving him an encouraging answer.

However, the leaders in Tokyo conveyed that Japan had major interests, particularly of an economic nature, in its relations with the Soviet Union, which is why they were not prepared to ratify the document as the European signatory states had done⁴⁰. The signing, on 28 January 1928, of the Fishing Convention between Japan and the USSR⁴¹, as well as the negotiations for the signing of commercial and navigation conventions, were clear signs, even in the eyes of the Bucharest leaders, of the importance of the Soviet factor in Romania's relations with Japan. This trend continued in the following years, even though the new head of the Romanian legation in Tokyo, Gheorghe Stoicescu (he headed the legation as chargé d'affaires until 1936), tried to widen the circle of friends of the Romanian diplomatic mission and to promote Romania's image in Japanese society⁴².

In this context, it should be mentioned that towards the end of 1929, a Japanese official presented to Stoicescu, "as a personal opinion", the idea that Japan and Romania should conclude a pact of friendship, given that they were the only monarchies neighboring the Soviet Union and were interested in defending their dynastic principle⁴³. Even if the head of the Romanian legation in Tokyo seemed delighted with this proposal, the

³⁶ Documents nr. 18, 19, 20 and 21, from 1925, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, p. 82–90.

³⁷ Document 23, *Telegram from the Romanian Legation in The Hague to the Romanian Foreign Minister, I.G. Duca, 8 December 1925*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, pp. 91–92.

³⁸ V. Urum, *Tokyo*, p. 127.

³⁹ Document 46, *Telegram from the Romanian legation in Tokyo to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, 7 March 1928*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, p. 118.

⁴⁰ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 160–162.

⁴¹ I. Șișcanu, Gh.E. Cojocaru, *Japonia și ratificarea...*, p. 32.

⁴² N. Ureche, *Propaganda externă a României Mari (1918–1940)*, București 2015, pp. 331–333.

⁴³ Document 62, *Telegram from the Romanian legation in Tokyo to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, 4 December 1929*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, p. 133.

Romanian Foreign Ministry's leadership interpreted the Japanese diplomat initiative in a different way:

Now, if Japan refuses to honour its signature, put on a treaty dated 10 years ago, precisely to avoid recognising our current border with Russia, will it be able to admit to indirectly recognising this border by signing a treaty of friendship, the conclusion of which would only be determined by monarchic solidarity? It seems hard to believe⁴⁴.

Therefore, the Romanian Foreign Ministry decided that it was not appropriate for the Romanian state to start negotiations for the signing of a treaty of friendship, as long as Japan had not ratified the Bessarabian Treaty⁴⁵. For Japan's long-standing attitude towards the 1920 treaty, the words expressed by the deputy Foreign Minister in Tokyo to Romania's diplomatic representative in June 1930 are revealing: "Do not insist; you only embarrass us, and all we can do is to apologize"⁴⁶.

However, Stoicescu was confident that Japan would somehow try to compensate Romania for the delay in ratifying the Bessarabia Treaty: "As far as our political interests with Japan are concerned, I believe that we will be able to benefit from their support either in Geneva or in The Hague⁴⁷, just as they will be able to benefit from our support in the League of Nations"⁴⁸.

The Head of the legation in Japan also believed that "Japan will tend to take an increasingly active part in the various international conferences and in particular in the League of Nations, asserting itself in its foreign policy [...] as a promoter of order, progress and peace"⁴⁹.

But the outbreak of the Manchurian crisis and the involvement of the League of Nations proved the Romanian diplomat analysis to be wrong. In fact, although he tried to be more active in the field of propaganda, it has been mentioned in historiography that Stoicescu's credibility with the Japanese authorities seems to have been at a lower level than that of his predecessor, Ion Aurel Vasiliu⁵⁰. However, he was kept for a long time as chargé d'affaires by the Romanian authorities⁵¹, which was common during the years of economic crisis, when the Romanian authorities cut back on expenditure, but less common in the case of Romanian diplomatic missions after 1933. Although there is no documentary evidence of this, it can be assumed that maintaining a chargé d'affaires at the head of the Tokyo

⁴⁴ M. Epure, *Din Carpați...*, p. 102; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 162.

⁴⁵ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe, București [Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bucharest] (hereinafter AMAE), fund 71/România, vol. 505, *Romania's Political Relations with Japan 1920–1940*, report written by N.M. Vlădescu, 1 October 1942, p. 6–9.

⁴⁶ Document 64, *Telegram from the Romanian legation in Tokyo to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, 21 June 1930*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ The diplomat is referring to the Permanent Court of International Justice, which between 1931 and 1933 was headed by the Japanese diplomat and jurist Mineichirō Adachi.

⁴⁸ AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Report sent by the Romanian legation in Japan to the head of the Romanian government, 31 January 1931, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova...*, p. 310.

⁵¹ It was only in 1936, after six and a half years as chargé d'affaires, that Stoicescu was appointed envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Tokyo, where he remained until 1938 (*Organizarea instituțională a Ministerului Afacerilor Externe...*, p. 550).

legation was a way for the Romanian state to express its dissatisfaction with Japan's delay in ratifying the 1920 treaty.

The issue of the ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty came up episodically in the context of the signing (by other states and by Romania and the USSR), in July 1933, of the Convention for the Definition of Aggression, but also in 1938, when, reacting to a message from the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, who wanted to know whether the Romanian authorities were still interested in obtaining Japan's ratification, the political director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest drew up a report from which it emerged that Romania would have only moral gains from ratification, while the inconveniences would be numerous⁵². When Romania and the USSR established diplomatic relations in June 1934, the Romanian authorities suspended their efforts to obtain Japan's ratification⁵³, in an attempt not to create new tensions in relations with the Soviets.

Romania, Japan and the Manchurian Crisis (1931–1933)

A test for Romanian Japanese relations was Romania's attitude towards the Sino-Japanese conflict from 1931–1933. The Manchurian crisis led to the involvement of the League of Nations and eventually produced Japan's withdrawal from the membership of the Geneva organization, which promoted collective security and peace. Within this framework, the Romanian state adopted a neutral position towards the crisis in the Far East⁵⁴. Romania's permanent representative to the League of Nations, Nicolae Titulescu, urged, in a speech delivered on 7 March 1932, respect for international treaties and for the League of Nations pact⁵⁵. Titulescu's speech was appreciated by both sides involved in the Far East conflict. The Japanese representatives present at the sessions of the General Assembly of the League of Nations, meeting in extraordinary session to consider the Manchurian conflict, told the Romanian diplomat that "unlike other states, we have found the means to defend the pact and our future interests without offending Japan, but we have also addressed warm words to Japan in these difficult times, which they will not forget"⁵⁶.

This was a message that Romania was supporting an international formula for resolving the crisis⁵⁷, but it also meant that the leaders in Bucharest did not want to complicate their relations with Japan. An argument in this sense is also the fact that N. Titulescu did not accept the proposal of being part of the Committee formed by the League of Nations to investigate the dispute in the Far East⁵⁸. A close attitude was also adopted by the head

⁵² Document 78, *Report by Alexandru Cretzianu, September 2, 1938*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, pp. 180–184.

⁵³ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 164.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 185–191.

⁵⁵ Document 225, *Speech delivered by Nicolae Titulescu at the Extraordinary General Assembly of the League of Nations, Geneva, 7 March 1932*, in: *Nicolae Titulescu. Documente diplomatice*, G. Macovescu (coord.), București 1967, pp. 398–403.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 403.

⁵⁷ I. Nish, *Japan's struggle with internationalism. Japan, China and the League of Nations, 1931–1933*, New York 2009, pp. 44–62.

⁵⁸ Document 218, *Telegram sent by Nicolae Titulescu to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 December 1931*, in: *Nicolae Titulescu. Documente...*, p. 391.

of the Romanian legation in Geneva, C. Antoniadu, who, in December 1932, delivered a speech to the League of Nations, mentioning that Romania considered the “Lytton report” as impartial and supported a peaceful settlement of the dispute⁵⁹.

Reactions of the Romanian diplomacy demonstrates the interest of the leaders from Bucharest to avoid altering relations with Japan, thus leaving open the possibility of ratification by the Japanese state of the 1920 treaty.

But Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in March 1933⁶⁰ meant that one of the areas of contact in which the two countries shared common interests disappeared. Moreover, Japan would be interested in deeper cooperation with states that wanted to change the international order established at the end of World War I.

Economic Interests and Political Distancing in the Second Interwar Decade

In the 1930s, relations between the two countries grew in intensity. Military attachés were appointed to the diplomatic missions in Tokyo and Bucharest⁶¹, and interest in developing the economic side of bilateral relations increased considerably⁶². However, due to distance and Bucharest’s protectionist policy, economic relations remained at a low level. One can observe a greater interest of the Japanese, who wanted to sell on the Romanian market various products (cotton yarn, etc.), but they were willing to buy oil as well, although transportation costs were high⁶³.

Although economic talks began in the mid-1920s⁶⁴, it was not until October 1930 that a Trade arrangement was signed⁶⁵. This document paved the way for the negotiation of a Treaty of Settlement, Commerce and Navigation, signed on 12 December 1934⁶⁶. The Romanian authorities initiated ratification procedures in April 1935, and the following month the law ratifying the treaty was promulgated by royal decree⁶⁷. Things were different for Japan, however. Although this was an issue desired by Japanese diplomacy since 1902, the Tokyo authorities did not ratify the document because they were unsatisfied with

⁵⁹ AMAE, fond 71/Japonia, vol. 10, The Bulletin of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania number 24, 31 December 1932, p. 180.

⁶⁰ As stipulated in the Covenant, the withdrawal did not take effect until the lapse of a waiting period of two years. Hence Japan’s departure from the League is dated 26 March 1935 (Th.W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: empire and world order, 1914–1938*, Honolulu 2008, pp. 175–176).

⁶¹ In 1932 Japan sent a military attaché to Romania, based in Warsaw. Romania appointed its first military attaché in Tokyo in 1934 (Gheorghe Băgulescu), but he arrived in Japan in February 1935. Nicolae Dascălu, *Relații româno-japoneze...*, p. 306; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 203.

⁶² AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, The report sent by the Romanian legation in Japan to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 March 1932, pp. 95–97.

⁶³ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 33. Document 64, *Telegram from the Romanian legation in Tokyo to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, 21 June 1930*, in: *Japonia și problema Basarabiei (1920–1940)...*, p. 135.

⁶⁴ Delegations from Romania and Japan negotiated an economic treaty in 1924, but the document was never signed (N. Dascălu, *Relații româno-japoneze...*, pp. 316–317).

⁶⁵ V. Urum, *Tokyo*, p. 129.

⁶⁶ Document 419, *Treaty of Settlement, Commerce and Navigation between Romania and Japan, 12 December 1934*, in: *Tratatetele internaționale ale României 1921–1939*, vol. II, Gh. Gheorghe (ed.), București 1980, pp. 445–446.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 446.

the protectionist trade policy of the Bucharest authorities (the Romanians had suspended import authorizations for goods from Japan)⁶⁸.

The solution to the impasse was the signing in 1937 of a Provisional Supplementary Agreement, which was valid until the end of 1938. Until January 1940, when a Trade Agreement was signed, economic relations between the two countries were settled based on an agreed six-month “arrangement”, the validity of which was extended⁶⁹.

The Japanese were interested in having open trade channels with Romania, while the Romanian side was interested in having an active trade balance and imposing the “compensation principle” as the basis for trade relations with Japan.

But at what level was the trade between the two countries? Analyzing the economic relations from Romania’s perspective, we note that in 1924 the Romanian state imported goods in a volume of 0.001%; in 1927, the percentage was 0.01% of the total volume of the Romanian state’s imports, and in 1937 (the peak year of bilateral trade), it reached 0.17%⁷⁰. Until the mid-1930s, the trade balance was favorable to Japan, and from 1936 onwards, a balance favorable to Romania can be observed, as the Japanese imported larger quantities of petroleum products⁷¹.

Although, even before the establishment of diplomatic relations between Romania and the USSR in June 1934, Romanian diplomats did not press for the ratification of the 1920 treaty; in order not to strain relations with Moscow, the Soviet factor remained a constant in Romanian Japanese relations. For example, in August 1936, a group of Japanese industrialists and merchants visited Romania for a few days as part of a tour of several European countries. The Japanese travelled to Romania at the invitation of Gheorghe Stoicescu, who, however, had not sought the approval of the authorities in Bucharest when he invited Romania to be included in the itinerary of the Japanese delegation. The government in Bucharest did not take kindly to the initiative of the plenipotentiary minister in Tokyo, who was also criticized by the Foreign Ministry. As it emerges from Romanian diplomatic correspondence, the Romanian Foreign Minister, N. Titulescu, tried to limit the impact of the Japanese delegation’s visit in order not to attract the attention of the Soviets: “I foresee difficulties from the USSR because of this. That is why I am of the opinion that the reception should be given a protocolary character, as we Romanians are good friends of the Japanese, but we have no interest in stirring up those who are hostile to Japan against us”⁷².

That is why the Japanese delegation visited various economic objectives in Romania but did not meet with high-ranking officials of the Romanian state, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed a second-ranking official to the delegation in charge of the Japanese visit⁷³.

⁶⁸ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 252–253; M. Epure, *Din Carpați...*, p. 178–179.

⁶⁹ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 253–254.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, pp. 250–251; Gh. Iacob, *Modernizare-europenism. România de la Cuză Vodă la Carol al II-lea*, vol. I: *Ritmul și strategia modernizării*, Iași 1995, pp. 146–149.

⁷¹ M. Epure, *Din Carpați...*, p. 135–136; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 263.

⁷² AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Telegram sent by N. Titulescu to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 August 1936, p. 145.

⁷³ AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Telegram sent by the secretary general of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to N. Titulescu, 7 August 1936, p. 152.

A few months after the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan (25 November 1936), the Japanese proposed to the Romanians, through their ambassador in Berlin, to exchange information on the activities of the communist movement. The leaders in Bucharest rejected the proposal, arguing that they were unwilling to take measures that might affect relations with Moscow (which could be interpreted as hostile)⁷⁴.

Our assumption is that after 1936, Romania's strategy was influenced by the fact that Japan was collaborating ever more closely with the two great revisionist powers, Germany and Italy. In addition, all three member countries of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis were no longer part of the League of Nations, while Romania was interested in the viability of the international order established at the end of the First World War. Thus, despite attempts to boost the economic component, trade relations between the two countries remained at a very low level, while political relations were influenced by the Soviet factor and the rapprochement between Japan and the revisionist states in Europe.

Romania and Japan (1940–1944)

Another stage in relations between Romania and Japan began with Romania's accession to the Tripartite Pact on 23 November 1940. Through this political act, Romania formally became an ally of Japan and a supporter of the "new order" that the three great powers – Germany, Japan and Italy – wanted to establish. At this stage, contacts between the representatives of the two countries intensified. Exchanges of information took place, but without extensive military cooperation (only intelligence cooperation), as the two armies were fighting on different fronts during the war⁷⁵.

The signing of the trade agreement in 1940, the establishment of the Japan-Romania Trade Association in Osaka⁷⁶ and the sending of a Romanian economic advisor to the Far East did not produce a major change in trade relations between Romania and Japan. The extension of military operations and the involvement of the two countries in the conflict led to a sharp decline in the fragile trade relations, which would come to a standstill after 1942.

At this stage of bilateral relations between the governments in Bucharest and Tokyo, influenced by Romania's entry into the war against the Soviet Union and the good relations between Japan and the USSR, the Soviet factor did not play as significant a role as in the interwar period. However, at many meetings between the Romanian Foreign Ministry leadership and Japanese diplomats, Japanese-USSR relations were discussed. The Romanians were interested to know whether Japan was considering an attack against the Soviet state, while the answer of the Japanese diplomats became more and more categorical, as the evolution of military operations was unfavorable to the Axis powers: "Japan will not change its policy towards Russia and will not declare war"⁷⁷.

⁷⁴ AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Telegram sent by the Romanian legation in Germany to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 May 1937, pp. 161–162.

⁷⁵ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 36.

⁷⁶ The Association was founded in April 1940 at the initiative of the Romanian Honorary Consulate in Japan, which had been functioning in Osaka since 1923 (AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Telegram sent by the Romanian Legation in Japan to the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 25 April 1940, p. 184).

⁷⁷ AMAE, fund 71/Japonia, vol. 12, Note on the conversation between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania and the Head of the Japanese Legation in Bucharest, 3 August 1943, f. 315.

At the diplomatic level contacts were intensified. For example, at Japan's request, on 1 December 1940, Romania recognized the state of Manchukuo, and in July 1941, the pro-Japanese government in Nanking⁷⁸. In an attempt to strengthen relations with Japan, the authorities in Bucharest, at the initiative of the Prime Minister, General Ion Antonescu, appointed the former Romanian military attaché in Tokyo, General Gheorghe Băgulescu, as Minister Plenipotentiary to Japan in February 1941. A great connoisseur of Japanese civilization, author of novels (*Japanese soul*, published in 1939), owner of a collection of oriental art and founder member of the Romanian Japanese Friendship Association, Băgulescu headed the Romanian Legation in Japan until April 1943⁷⁹. However, after the publication of a book (*New Religion*), in which he condemned the war and a conflict with the Romanian military attaché, he was replaced at the head of the legation. In his place, General Nicolae Rădulescu, the military attaché of the diplomatic mission, was appointed as chargé d'affaires and headed the Romanian legation until the severing of diplomatic relations between Romania and Japan on 31 October 1944⁸⁰, after Romania withdrew from collaboration with the Axis powers on 23 August 1944.

Conclusions

From 1917 to 1944, relations between Romania and Japan went through several stages: from the establishment of diplomatic relations and the setting up of legations, to collaboration within the League of Nations and then in the years of World War II as countries fighting on the same politico-military side.

Although they were the USSR's only neighboring monarchies and shared a common concern about the potential Soviet threat, Romanian Japanese relations failed to overcome the handicap of the long distance between the two states and the orientation of their trade towards other areas. The Romania-USSR-Japan geopolitical triangle disadvantaged the Romanian state, which lacked the resources to compensate for a complex relationship such as that between Moscow and Tokyo. This is why the authorities in Bucharest did not invest much effort in developing relations with Japan. Moreover, after Romania established diplomatic relations with the USSR, and Japan joined Germany and Italy, relations focused mainly on the economic side. The change that took place from 1940 onwards, with Romania's accession to the Tripartite Pact, did not have major consequences for Romanian Japanese relations. However, Romania was Japan's most important partner in South-East Europe during the period under analysis.

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⁷⁸ I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, p. 34.

⁷⁹ M. Epure, *Din Carpați...*, p. 292–305.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 311–315; I. Scumpieru, *133 de ani de relații...*, pp. 217–218.

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