



Japanese Aggression in East Asia

Ian Birdwell
Graduate Program in International Studies
Old Dominion University

Introduction

The League of Nations emerged out of the ashes of the Great War, with the hope the new collective security organization could keep a peace among its members, and prevent another global conflict. This lofty ambition of keeping the peace framed all League actions.



The Army of Japan prepared to attack Chinese guards on the Marco Polo Bridge, 7 July 1937¹

The League was responsible for successful negotiations to resolve several territorial disputes. There also were notable failures, most spectacularly the Mukden Incident involving Japan in China in 1931 and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia today) in 1935.

In 1937, the Marco Polo (or Lugou) Bridge Incident, a skirmish involving Japanese troops taking control of a crucial route to Beijing, announced the start of the *Second Sino-Japanese War*. The event pushed Tokyo's aggression to the forefront of League business. Soon the Japanese Army and Air Force were attacking throughout the country, threatening to take

complete control. Later the incident would become known as the start of the Second World War, but in 1937 hope remained that the scale of fighting could be restrained.²

Japanese aggression in China has three implications for world peace and the League of nations:

- First, will the international community be able to act forthrightly to block or reverse Japanese efforts to take control of Chinese territory?
- Second, can Japan be persuaded that the costs of aggression outweigh any potential gains, sufficiently that it is dissuaded from further attacks elsewhere in East Asia?
- And third, will the League itself remain a relevant actor in world affairs, an organization with a future place in the world order, or will the world drift into renewed war, and the League drift into irrelevance?

The League and Japan

There is a tenuous history between the League and Japan in East Asia, which first began in the Mukden Incident of 1931. Japan invaded the northern Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931, claiming its resource wealth. China, as a

¹ *Marco Polo Bridge Incident (July 7, 1937)*, 2015, <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2015/12/29/marco-polo-bridge-incident-july-7-1937/>

² Crowley, James B. "A Reconsideration of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 3 (1963): 277.



founding Member State, appealed to the League to stop and reverse the invasion.³

With other Member States unwilling to commit military force against Japan, the League Members concluded nothing more could be done than establish the facts of the case. The Member States made their reaction contingent on the report of an investigatory commission. The resulting Lytton Report of 1932 was written to support the hesitation of outside powers, allowing them to justify inaction. The Lytton Report accepted Japanese control over Manchuria as a *fait accompli* (a thing accomplished, irreversible).⁴



Chiang Kai-shek, Premier of the Republic of China, 1930-47

With Japan's creation of the Japanese-controlled puppet state of in Manchuria, re-named Manchukuo, Japanese aggression appeared to be successful. The apparent success of territorial dismemberment of China would lead Japan to a series of subsequent steps, culminating in Japan's full-scale war to take control of all of China in 1937.⁵

Throughout this all, the League remained engaged in China not just because of Japanese aggression, but also due to the effects of the ongoing Chinese Civil War. The civil war pitted the army of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China, KMT) government under Chiang Kai-shek, and its main domestic challenger, the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong

Responding to criticism by other League Member States Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933. There was little Member States seemed able to contribute to restoration of peace in East Asia. The great post-1918 hope for *collective security*—that the League would act decisively against any aggressor—was tenuous at best. By the time of the Marco Polo Bridge incident, the League had limited options in the face of Japanese attacks. Was the path to a second world war in East Asia and the Pacific unstoppable?

³ Ferrell, Robert H. "The Mukden incident: September 18-19, 1931." *The Journal of modern history* 27, no. 1 (1955): 66-67

⁴ *Ibid.* 67

⁵ Han, Suk-Jung. "The problem of sovereignty: Manchukuo, 1932-1937." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12, no. 2 (2004): 462



Map of China in 1941, after initial Japanese conquests in 1937

Another Taste of Total War

The League has addressed warfare before the Japanese Invasion of China, but the scope of this conflict could be a resurgence of total war for the League to address.⁶ Beginning with fighting in and around Beijing, the Chinese Northeast Coast has become embroiled in conflict. With significant battles occurring in the skies above Shanghai and within the city itself, though the city fell following brutal fighting.⁷

⁶ Craft, Stephen G. "Opponents of appeasement: Western-educated Chinese diplomats and intellectuals and Sino-Japanese relations, 1932-37." *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2001): 213.

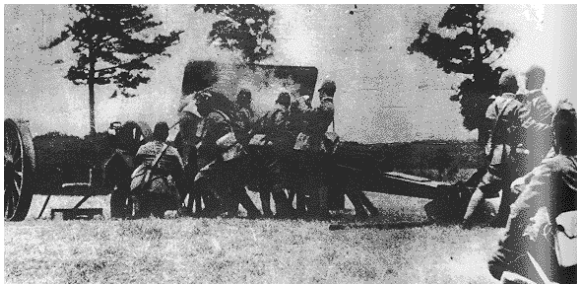
As of this moment in September of 1937 it seems as though nothing can prevent the conflict from continuing to spiral out of control. In the initial fighting over 200,000 Chinese soldiers were killed. At this moment, the government of the Republic of China seems to have stabilized its position, limiting Chinese conquests to major cities on the coasts while containing the

⁷ Liu, James TC. "German Mediation in the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-38." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (1949): 158.



Communist threat to its rule, but this does not appear sustainable.⁸

Most observers agree that the peace the League of Nations was created to maintain has begun to crumble in Asia. There remains a chance for the League to respond to the ongoing violence and hold its Member States and aggressors to Article 11 of the League Charter which prioritizes the maintenance of international peace.⁹



Japanese army soldiers shelling China's Wanping Fortress, 1937

The conflict raises three distinct areas of concern for the League and East Asia: the renewed fear of chemical warfare, the treatment of civilian populations, and a return to globalized total war.

Initially, the League has been concerned about the possibility of the possibility of chemical warfare in the Sino-Japanese conflict. With the failure of the League to prevent the usage of chemical weaponry in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, there is the desire to make sure the international community can respond to another use or preventing its use in the first place.¹⁰ The possible scale of the conflict, even

⁸ 'Japanese Attack on China 1937', in U.S., Department of State, *Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy, 1931-1941* (Washington, D.C.: U.S., Government Printing Office, 1943), pp.44-52, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/WorldWar2/c hina.htm>

with just two notable battles concluded, holds to the possibility of such weaponry being used.

Next, the prospect of war always leaves open the abuse of civilian populations. The case of the Sino-Japanese conflict holds similar repercussions already for civilian populations, especially given the scale of the Battle of Shanghai, where thousands of civilians were slain and homes destroyed by Japanese and Chinese attacks alike.¹¹ With Japan's focus on attacking urban centers and China's a harsh defense against such action, there remains a strong chance of the conflict detrimentally affecting civilian populations in China either in creating a diaspora of refugees from coastal cities or outright violence against civilians.

The Sino-Japanese conflict is the first instance of conflict breaking out between two states which holds the potential for total warfare to be seen on the globe since the conclusion of the Great War. So long as the conflict continues, the prospects of industrialized total warfare increases the longer the conflict goes unmediated. In the context of six years of slowly built aggression from Japan towards China, there is a strong likelihood the war will continue to spiral if left unaddressed by the League.

Principles of international conduct, the foundation of international collective security, are in danger of becoming irrelevant. But Member States are cautious. Many emerged from the Great War deeply scarred, their military capabilities hollowed, their willingness to sacrifice more their young men greatly reduced. If anything, they are more concerned with the dangers of conflict closer to home.

⁹ Dunbabin, John P. "The League of Nations' Place in the International System." *History* 78, no. 254 (1993): 430

¹⁰ Grip, Lina, and John Hart. "The use of chemical weapons in the 1935-36 Italo-Ethiopian War." *SIPRI Arms Control and Non-proliferation Programme* (2009): 2

¹¹ Henriot, Christian. "Shanghai and the experience of war: The fate of refugees." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2006): 218-219



European states are preoccupied with the twin threats of the Soviet Union's revolutionary communism, and the restoration of German power under its new nationalist leader, Adolph Hitler. Latin American countries have recently seen a wave of civil wars and revolution, most spectacularly in Mexico, and are witnessing a major war in the mid-1930s between Bolivia and Paraguay, the Chaco War. Countries like the United States have retreated into neutrality and isolationism. As a result, outside powers are hesitant to engage the east Asian situation with their own militaries. They see what is at stake, but fear to act.

Role of the League of Nations

In the case of the ongoing aggression of Japan against China, the League of Nations remains the preeminent international body. There is no other organization with the resources to attempt to resolve the conflict, either through peaceful negotiation or a security commitment by the Member States. The League has been involved with the conflict between China and Japan since the Mukden Incident in 1931, where it condemned Japanese aggression in the next year. The Member States agree on the responsibility act.

The commitment of the League to the preservation of peace and negotiation to prevent or stop outright warfare has been a guiding principle in prior conflicts. That principle is no less vital in the Sino-Japanese Conflict.

In terms of what the League has available in its power to follow through on those ideas there are options available through utilizing League frameworks. Particularly, the commitment of powerful states to the League's processes in diplomacy may be helpful in the cooling of the conflict. The ultimate decision for acting though

would lie on the floor of the League's Council, unless it is brought before the assembly for discussion among members. On the floor of the chamber, resolutions would be undertaken to determine what actions should be pursued to resolve or otherwise condemn the crisis. These resolutions can be varied and will be returned to later.

Landmark Resolutions

The League had successes preventing, containing or stopping inter-state warfare. These crises witnessed the League successfully negotiating, resolving, and otherwise assisting in maintenance of regional peace. There have been two specific incidents which demonstrated what the League can do when conditions are right: the *Incident at Petrich* and resolution of the *Chaco War*. They also establish precedent for action addressing Japanese aggression in East Asia. They set a baseline for evaluating the League's success or failure in this new crisis

Initially, the [Incident at Petrich](#) involved a conflict between Bulgaria and Greece in 1925 regarding the slaying of Greek soldiers by their Bulgarian counterparts.¹² The crisis was especially frightening because this was the same region where crises provoked The Great War in June-July 1914.

The League of Nations sought and received acceptance by both sides to mediate the dispute. The key issue was compensation for the slain soldiers following the Greek seizure of Petrich, a Bulgarian town.¹³ The League was able to resolve the dispute, debating toward mutually agreed framework in the League Council. Among its most powerful responses was the threat to blockade Greek ports, a form of what today would be called sanctions on arms imports and trade.¹⁴ Importantly, the Greek government

¹² Barros, James. "The Greek-Bulgarian Incident of 1925: The League of Nations and the Great Powers." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 108, no. 4 (1964): 354

¹³ Ibid 354

¹⁴ Ibid. 375-376.



gave in to the Council's demands within the dispute. Acceptance of the Council's resolution ended and facilitated a final negotiated solution.

Next, the outbreak of [the Chaco War](#), which started in 1932 and continued until 1935, brought Latin American concerns regarding the spiraling of territorial disputes to the League. The Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia was fought over control of a large, contested province, Chaco, rich in petroleum.¹⁵ The conflict saw the League establish a commission to assist in mediation of the dispute and ending the bloodshed. This culminated after two years of efforts in a negotiated armistice.¹⁶

To achieve lasting peace, the League Member States agreed to utilize Article 15 of the League Charter, it powers to establish instruments including a Commission of Neutrals to mediate conflict issues, and legal processes to bring other issues before the International Court of Justice in the Hague.¹⁷

Though League mediation initially failed to stop the fighting, the Member States of the Commission of Neutrals, including representatives from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, the United States and Uruguay, were able to fulfill League goals of investigating rival claims and facilitating an end to the fighting in the Chaco region.¹⁸ Thus, the League of Nations was able to gather a coalition of states to carry out the League mandate and restore peace.



The Marco Polo Bridge, near Beijing, today

Country and bloc positions

European Member States: European states are divided on the issue of Japanese aggression in China. A faction believes something needs to be done to prevent the war from escalating. They are especially concerned that the war could embolden Japan and eventually threaten their own colonial holdings in Asia. This group includes France (which still controlled Indochina, today's Vietnam and neighboring countries), the Netherlands (Dutch East Indies, today's Indonesia), Portugal (Goa and Macau), and the United Kingdom (Burma, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and several other territories).

Meanwhile another European faction supports the Japanese position, which they view not as aggression, but a legitimate response to domestic chaos. In their view, Japan is doing a service to global stability. Their ranks include countries contemplating invasions or expansion of their own, especially Germany, Hungary, Italy, and the Soviet Union.

Latin American Member States: As Japanese aggression continues in East Asia; South American states have been tepid about making direct statements regarding the conflict. Their eyes are preoccupied with events closer to home.

¹⁵ Woolsey, Lester H. "The Settlement of the Chaco Dispute." *American Journal of International Law* 33, no. 1 (1939): 126

¹⁶ Ibid. 126

¹⁷ Ibid. 127

¹⁸ Ibid. 127



Most support League neutrality and *good offices*, support for mediation and conflict resolution. There is a strong sense of internationalism and the importance of international mediation in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and others.

Another group of Latin American Member States has begun to support the idea that the League should not have as strong a role in mediating or resolving matters of warfare, these states include Cuba, Peru, Paraguay, and Honduras.

Asian Member States: Among Asian League Member States, Japanese aggression provokes a mixed response. There is a faction willingly supporting Japanese expansionism for a variety of reasons, including fear of chaos or revolution in China, or simple support for Japanese expansions. Their ranks include Iran and Siam. Meanwhile, Member States like Australia and New Zealand have grown increasingly concerned regarding continued Japanese aggression in the region. China is demanding help.

African and Middle Eastern Member States: Japanese aggression has garnered some ill will in Africa and the Middle East and calls for the international community to respect the sovereignty of Member States. Among those who are critical of the international community willingness to act are Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Iraq. While the states who most support some action being undertaken includes Liberia, South Africa and Turkey.

North American Member States: North America is the only region which appears to wholly support the idea that the League should act against Japan in East Asia. Canada and Mexico have pressed the League to act or made statements to that affect since the Mukden Incident of 1931. Even the United States is calling for action, although it is refused to join the League.

Proposals for Action

The processes surrounding the League's ability to address aggression in the international system are varied and rely on gaining consensus within either the League Council or the League Assembly to support resolutions. Major possibilities for action include:

- **Recognize warfare as an immutable part of the international system** and declare the League will not address ongoing conflicts, only assisting in the prevention and resolution of warfare after being asked by both belligerent parties for assistance. This would support Japanese actions and create a precedent for further colonial conquest.
- **Call for a peace negotiation and partition of territory** to appease Japanese ambition and prevent further bloodshed. If the League cannot mobilize even commitment to reverse the fighting, maybe it can stabilize the situation. This would leave the Chinese greatly aggrieved, undermined by their would-be saviors, but some Member States might view such capitulation as the best they can achieve with limited commitment.
- **Commit to Articles 11 and form a coalition of willing partners** to support Chinese resistance against Japan either through material or military aid. Aid could include military assistance, arms transfers and training, or commitment of forces to support the Kuomintang Chinese. By sticking to the principles of the League Charter, the Member States would strengthen the principle of collective security, raise barriers to further war in China and elsewhere, including against a renewed Great War.



- **Create a new committee** to study issues surrounding the treatment of civilians in war-torn East Asia. A second Lytton Commission-type investigation would not delight the Chinese, but it would postpone demands for action and might allow China and Japan time to resolve the dispute militarily. Either way, it would postpone a reckoning for outside powers.
- **Establish aid programs** to assist civilians who may be displaced by conflict. Rather than act to stop the war, which might require sending their own armed forces, Member States could mitigate the effects of the war on civilian victims.
- **Commit to a trade blockade of all belligerents in the conflict** in order to starve both sides of their ability to make war. Trade sanctions and a halt to military aid would most rapidly affect China, because its economy is less developed, and it was less prepared for the conflict.
- **Aim a trade blockade at Japan alone**, as the aggressor. This would require taking sides, which many Member States would resist. It could provoke further conflict with Japan, which many have no taste to face.
- **Turn over the discussion to the Nine-Power Treaty Conference** and declare the League cannot do anything on the matter without the consent of the Conference.



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