



Research Report

League of Nations

Issue 1: Addressing Japanese aggression in Manchuria to preserve international peace and uphold collective security (1931)

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Introduction

The Manchurian Crisis of 1931 refers to Japan's illegal invasion and occupation of Manchuria, a region located in northeastern China. On September 18, 1931, the Japanese Kwantung Army detonated a bomb on a railway owned by Japan near Mukden, falsely attributing the act to Chinese forces as a justification for their invasion. Within a matter of weeks, disorganized Chinese troops were overcome, enabling Japanese forces to take control of Manchuria and subsequently establish the puppet state of Manchukuo. This aggressive maneuver represented a clear violation of international law and the core principles of the League of Nations. Japan's actions flouted the League Covenant, particularly Article 10, which ensures territorial integrity, and breached previous treaties that acknowledged China's sovereignty, including the 1922 Nine-Power Treaty. The crisis presents a challenge to the post-World War I order: if it remains unaddressed, it threatens collective security and undermines the credibility of international law. Smaller members of the League and China urged strict compliance with Covenant obligations. Given that the invasion endangers regional stability, trade, and the principle that aggression should not prevail, it is a concern for all nations. No single country can resolve the conflict on its own; global peace requires a coordinated legal response.

Japan's Manchurian campaign underscores the urgent need for international focus on this matter. It undermines treaties such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which both China and Japan supported, and raises the risk that any nation might resort to force to alter borders. Smaller nations, including Australia and others, voiced their concerns regarding Japan's expansion while also exercising caution regarding severe retaliation. Meanwhile, the United States and the Soviet Union, although not members of the League, had significant interests in the stability of China (the U.S. through its Open Door policy and concessions in China, and the USSR through its borders and railways).

Definition of Key Terms

Collective security: This refers to a system where aggression by any state is regarded as a threat to all, prompting a unified response. Within the League's structure, this implies that members should assist any nation that comes under attack and consider aggressive actions as issues of mutual concern. Collective security is the fundamental principle upon which the League was established to avert conflicts like the one in Manchuria.

Expansionism: A political and strategic approach in which a nation aims to broaden its territory, economic sway, or political authority beyond its current borders. In 1931, Japanese expansionism specifically refers to attempts to seize control of Manchuria for its strategic resources, security benefits against the USSR, and regional supremacy.

Kellogg-Briand Pact: Despite the popular cereal having no correlation, this international agreement saw nations such as Japan and China commit to renouncing war as a means of resolving national disputes. Consequently, Japan's invasion was evidently unlawful. The League sought to leverage this Pact to exert pressure on Japan, particularly during Council meetings; however, as noted in a U.S. historical account, "appeals based on the pact... proved ineffective".

Kwantung Army: This was a prominent regional force of the Imperial Japanese Army stationed in southern Manchuria, named after the Kwantung Territory. Initially established to protect Japan's railway and leased territories in Manchuria, the Kwantung Army (特別軍, Kantō-gun) operated with considerable autonomy. Its junior officers were instrumental in the Mukden Incident and spearheaded the occupation of Manchuria.

League of Nations Covenant: This document served as the foundation of the League, incorporated into the peace treaties following World War I. It mandates that members "accept and preserve" the independence of all members (Article 10) and view any breach of peace as a concern for the entire League (Article 11). Articles 12–16 detail the processes for mediation and obligatory sanctions against aggressors (Article 16 specifically calls for trade and financial blockades on any member that violates the covenant). The Covenant encapsulates the idea of

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collective security: all nations agree to collaborate against aggression to uphold peace.

Manchukuo: In early 1932, Japan proclaimed a puppet state in the occupied territory of Manchuria known as Manchukuo. Although it appeared to be autonomous, it was, in reality, under the dominion of the Japanese military. Its formation infringed upon Chinese sovereignty and existing treaties, and it was not recognized by the League.

Mukden Incident (Manchurian Incident): On September 18, 1931, members of Japan's Kwantung Army detonated an explosion on the South Manchuria Railway near Mukden (Shenyang). This misleading act served as Japan's rationale to initiate a comprehensive invasion of Manchuria.

Nine-Power Treaty: Signed at the Washington Naval Conference, this treaty affirmed China's sovereignty and territorial integrity in line with the Open Door Policy. Nations including Britain, France, Japan, and the U.S. pledged to honor China's borders. Nevertheless, Japan's occupation of Manchuria breached this treaty, undermining the stability of the post-war order.

Open Door Policy: This principle, championed by the U.S. and officially articulated by Secretary of State John Hay in 1899, asserted that all foreign nations should enjoy equal trading rights in China and that China's territorial sovereignty must be upheld. This policy played a vital role in shaping the Western response to the Manchurian crisis, as the U.S. perceived Japanese expansion as a challenge to the commitments of the Open Door.

Puppet State: An ostensibly autonomous state that is, in reality, governed by another foreign power. Its administration functions under the influence or guidance of the dominating nation, lacking true independence in both domestic and international matters.

Background

In 1931, Manchuria was a thriving yet poorly defended area of China, recognized for its rich natural resources like coal and iron, along with an extensive railway system. Japan's involvement in this region began after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), during which the Portsmouth Treaty granted Japan leases and considerable rights, including control over the South Manchuria Railway and the Kwantung Leased Territory. This laid the groundwork for Japan's lasting security and economic interests in Manchuria. Throughout the 1920s, Japan sought to enhance its influence, while Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin ruled Manchuria, albeit with the obligation to acknowledge Japanese interests. After Zhang Zuolin was assassinated by agents of the Kwantung Army in 1928, his son Zhang Xueliang took over but opted to align with China's Nationalist government led by Jiang Jieshi. Japan was displeased with this shift and began to devise plans to regain control. In August 1931, just months before the invasion, Japan signed a Sino-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact; however, this agreement quickly fell apart as hostilities erupted.

On the global front, the 1920s were characterized by treaties aimed at safeguarding Chinese sovereignty and preventing conflict. The 1922 Washington Conference resulted in the Nine-Power Treaty, in which Japan and other countries committed to maintaining “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of China.” Furthermore, the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, which included both Japan and China, forbade acts of aggressive warfare. These legal frameworks, along with the collective-security measures of the League Covenant, suggested that Japan's ambitions in Manchuria directly challenged a system designed to prevent such invasions.

By the autumn of 1931, tensions in Manchuria were escalating. On September 18, 1931, a minor explosion took place on the Japanese-owned railway close to Mukden. The Kwantung Army quickly attributed the incident to Chinese soldiers and invaded Manchuria within a few short months, taking control of the region with little organized opposition. Japanese forces captured Mukden and pushed further, seizing major cities. The Chinese garrison units, led by Zhang Xueliang, were understaffed and ultimately retreated westward. Many refugees fled from the areas of conflict. In response, the Jiang Jieshi government urgently contacted the League. On

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September 21, China's League envoy formally requested the Council to invoke Article 11 and "take steps to prevent the further development of a situation endangering the peace of nations".

The League of Nations Council met that same week. On September 22, the Council passed a unanimous resolution urging both Japan and China to "refrain from any actions that could worsen the Manchurian situation," and to negotiate troop withdrawals either jointly or through the Council. The Council forwarded its documents to the United States (a notable non-member) and invited all parties to collaborate for peace. Britain and France even proposed that both sides withdraw their forces as a confidence-building measure. However, these diplomatic initiatives did not halt the events unfolding on the ground. Japan continued to solidify its control over Manchuria, establishing Japanese-led local governments in occupied towns. In November 1931, the civilian government in Tokyo (under Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijirō) accepted a League proposal for a neutral demilitarized zone between Manchuria and China. This was intended to act as a temporary buffer while further discussions were held. However, this concession was short-lived: the Wakatsuki cabinet collapsed in December 1931 and was replaced by a more hardline government. Japan then reinforced its armies, and even as the League deliberated, began plans to establish a new independent regime in Manchuria.

By the end of 1931, the crisis had come to a halt. Japan had nearly complete military control in Manchuria, whereas China was diminishing in its influence there and was in search of assistance. The reputation of the League was at stake: failure to halt Japan could result in increased aggression in other regions. The delegates of the League faced a significant decision regarding their response, whether to continue advocating for diplomatic pressure and sanctions as outlined in the Covenant, or to consider alternative methods to mitigate the conflict.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Japan: The main catalyst behind this crisis is the Japanese government, especially its military leaders. The Mukden Incident was instigated by the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, which aimed to take control of the area. Japanese officials justified their actions by claiming they were responding to supposed Chinese "provocations," yet the true motive was the army's ambition to dominate Manchuria's resources and strategic importance. By late 1931, the civilian government was in turmoil: Prime Minister Wakatsuki attempted to ease tensions by suggesting a neutral zone, but after his ousting, more aggressive officers took charge. The Japanese delegation to the League Council has effectively ignored the decisions of the League of Nations; in fact, Tokyo later disregarded the Council's demand for withdrawal by November 1931, choosing instead to pursue "direct negotiations" on its own terms. Japan argues that its actions are legally justified to protect its interests, a claim that is largely rejected by other nations.

China (Republic of China): The government led by Jiang Jieshi in Nanjing is facing aggression. Chiang's Foreign Minister, V.K. Wellington Koo, led China's diplomatic efforts at the League. China officially invoked Article 11 of the Covenant, urging the Council to take "immediate steps" to stop Japan's actions. The Chinese military was weakened and devastated by conflict; Manchurian forces under Marshal Zhang Xueliang had pledged loyalty to the Nationalists but were unable to halt the Japanese advance. China asserts its claim to sovereignty over Manchuria and has called for an end to hostilities and the withdrawal of Japanese troops. During the Council discussions, the Chinese delegate pointed out that Japan had already "resorted to measures other than diplomacy," thus requiring the League's intervention. China's appeal is backed by moral and legal arguments but depends on the support of the League, as it lacks the capacity to expel the Japanese by force.

United Kingdom: A permanent Council member and global power, Britain plays a key role. The British government has publicly supported the League's efforts and joined France in urging a negotiated solution. British diplomats in Geneva proposed that both Japan and China withdraw troops as a prelude to talks. In Parliament the Foreign Secretary defended the use of League

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conciliation and warned against allowing Japan's action to stand. The UK's interests include defending its own Asian possessions and trade routes; it also has treaty obligations in China. However, Britain faces domestic pressures (economic depression, pacifist opinion) which makes it cautious about aggressive measures. London is reluctant to enact harsh sanctions unilaterally, preferring to work through the League to uphold legal norms.

France: Also a Council permanent member, France shares Britain's collective-security outlook. France has an interest in checking Japanese aggression (given its colonies in Indochina and alliance with the Republic of China) and has supported the League's process. French representatives joined Britain in proposing troop withdrawals and have endorsed Council resolutions condemning Japan. Like Britain, France is constrained by European tensions and economic hardship, making it hesitant to use force. Nevertheless, France remains a consistent supporter of applying international law to the crisis.

United States: Although the U.S. is not a member of the League, it engages indirectly through treaty commitments (Nine-Power, Kellogg-Briand) and its Open Door policy. The State Department has expressed significant concerns about the violation of Chinese sovereignty and the American ideals of equal trade access. In late 1931, the U.S. dispatched an observer (Norman Davis) to the Council in Geneva to offer guidance on enforcing the Kellogg Pact. Secretary of State Stimson, under President Hoover, subsequently declared the Stimson Doctrine (January 1932), which asserted non-recognition of Manchuria's annexation. U.S. officials encouraged League members to seek negotiation or legal arbitration rather than immediate punitive measures. For example, the U.S. response to the League resolution suggested that China and Japan utilize the Covenant's mechanisms or contemplate joint actions under the Nine-Power or Kellogg treaties. In conclusion, the U.S. supports China's legal claims and publicly criticizes Japan, while striving to avert direct conflict and aspiring for a peaceful resolution in line with international agreements.

Soviet Union: The USSR had not yet joined the League but held significant regional interests. Soviet Russia established its own non-aggression pact with China (signed shortly after the crisis commenced) and governed Outer Mongolia, located north of Manchuria. The Soviet government was apprehensive that Japan, a historical adversary, might threaten its Far Eastern borders. In late

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1931, the USSR formally protested against Japanese interference with the Chinese Eastern Railway (a Soviet concession in Manchuria). The USSR refrained from participating in any collective sanctions and largely steered clear of League politics, yet it did supply arms and counsel to Chinese forces. Soviet concerns regarding Japan would eventually foster greater collaboration with the League on this issue, but for the time being, the Soviets remain cautious observers.

Possible Solutions

Authorization of Joint Military Actions

An alternative that has been discussed is for the League to contemplate collective military enforcement as specified in Article 16 of the Covenant. Should Japan be officially found to have breached its obligations, member nations might coordinate naval blockades or even deploy military forces to compel Japan to withdraw from Manchuria. Advocates of this measure would contend that collective security holds no value without the readiness to enforce it. A robust military response could dissuade future aggressive actions by illustrating that the League is willing to uphold its principles. Conversely, detractors would highlight the significant risks involved. A military confrontation with Japan could escalate into a broader conflict in East Asia and potentially involve other major powers. Numerous League members are economically strained due to the global depression and are politically hesitant to deploy troops overseas. This strategy tests the very limits of the League's strength and cohesion.

Consideration of Manchukuo's Recognition in Exchange for Assurances

A proposal that has garnered significant attention is for the League to consider recognizing the newly formed state of Manchukuo, contingent upon Japan ensuring its formal independence, allowing free trade, and protecting foreign rights in the area. Under this agreement, Japan would commit to maintaining the Open Door Policy and restraining any further military expansion beyond Manchuria. Proponents of this idea may contend that the occupation of Manchuria is already a fact and that pragmatic diplomacy could avert a larger conflict. By obtaining legal assurances and international oversight, the League could play a role in stabilizing the situation and preventing an escalation into northern China.

Multilateral Conference and Treaty Revision

One possibility is to convene an international conference that includes Japan, China, and the key nations involved in the Nine Power Treaty. This gathering could tackle the core issues in Manchuria, such as economic rights, railway management, and security concerns in the region. This approach recognizes that Japan's actions were motivated by its long-term strategic and economic goals. A negotiated agreement that respects Chinese sovereignty while clarifying foreign rights in Manchuria could pave the way for a lasting compromise. Nevertheless, if not meticulously planned, this strategy might seem to reward aggressive behavior.

Establishment of a Neutral or Demilitarized Zone

Delegates could suggest the creation of a temporary neutral zone between the Chinese and Japanese military forces in Manchuria. Under this plan, both parties would pull back their troops from disputed regions, which would be overseen by unbiased observers appointed by the League. This initiative could assist in alleviating current military tensions and avert further escalation as negotiations progress. Additionally, it could provide Japan with an opportunity to maintain its dignity while respecting the principle of Chinese sovereignty. Nevertheless, such an agreement would necessitate meticulous supervision and collaboration from both parties.

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