

The Failure of International Diplomacy and Economic Sanctions in Response to Japan's Aggression in East Asia, 1931-1937

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ABSTRACT

This analysis examines the response of key global players, including Japan, China, Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the broader international community, to Japan's aggressive expansion in Asia during the interwar period. Focusing on the Brussels Conference of 1937, which addressed Japan's invasion of China, the study explores why substantive measures such as economic sanctions were not imposed against Japan. From Japan's perspective, resource scarcity and geopolitical concerns drove its expansionist ambitions. The failure of international treaties and the breakdown of civilian-military relations within Japan further complicated the situation. China sought international support against Japanese aggression, citing treaty violations and invoking the Kellogg-Briand Pact and Nine-Power Treaty. Britain aimed for peace but hesitated to apply sanctions without broader international consensus, relying on U.S. involvement. The United States, prioritizing national security and domestic opinion, avoided direct military engagement, advocating for moral pressure on Japan. The Soviet Union supported collective action against Japan due to historical tensions. Despite sympathetic sentiments from the international community, particularly towards China, the Brussels Conference failed to produce effective measures against Japan. This analysis underscores the challenges of international coordination and the limitations of diplomacy in addressing aggressive actions by major powers during a critical period in global history.

Keywords: Brussels conference; Economic sanctions; Global history; Communistic influence

INTRODUCTION

After World War I, the main threat to the stability of the international system in Asia was from Japan. In 1931, Japan invaded East Asia and began its invasion of Manchuria, reducing the Northeast China region to its puppet state. In 1937 Japan started a brutal attack on China. Although the Hoover administration refused to recognize the Manchurian regime since it was based on force, it did not make any military response and refused to impose economic sanctions against Japan as well.

Based on the response from the United States, Japan inferred that the U.S. would not use its military to oppose its ambitions in the Asian region. In response, the Brussels Conference was held in late October 1937. From the beginning, the atmosphere of the Brussels Conference differed from that of the Washington Conference as the conferees discussed the possibility of employing sanctions against Japan. Chiang Kai-shek called for help from the international community to resist the Japanese invasion by signing the Nine-Power Treaty. However, Japan refused to participate in the

Brussels Conference, argued that its military force in China was only self-defense against Chinese anti-Japanese policy, and insisted that its dispute with China was not in the treaty's purview [1]. The delegates of states discussed whether to impose economic sanctions against Japan or not, and the U.S. declared it would not impose sanctions. Hence, after passing a report that mildly criticized Japanese aggression, the conference adjourned.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will make an analysis of the reason why the Brussels Conference did not take any serious measures against Japan's invasion from the perspective of the five main states: Japan, China, Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the international community.

From the perspective of Japan

In addition, the Washington Naval Conference of 1922 had allocated a smaller naval tonnage to Japan than Great Britain and

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the U.S., which caused resentment and distrust of civilian control in Japan [2]. Army and civilian extremists accused moderate politicians of disregarding Japan's national interests because they opposed increased military spending and territorial expansion by force. In 1928, by reducing Nationalist enthusiasm in Manchuria, extremists in Japan's Kwantung Army assassinated the Chinese warlord ruler. However, the murder was not authorized by the Japanese imperial government, when the Tanaka government attempted to punish the culprits and re-establish discipline of the army, it was hindered by the Japanese Army General, which meant military discipline had broken down and the imperial government had lost control of Japanese Army. Also, in 1930, the civilian government was overthrown by extremists, and Prime Minister Hamaguchi was assassinated. Japanese army extremists were frustrated by Japan's existing political and economic structures, and determined to promote Japan's progress by military expansion [2].

Moreover, the Soviet Union was still regarded as a threat to Japan even though Japan had won the Russo-Japanese war. Hence, Manchuria as an essential "buffer zone" bordered the Soviet Union could prevent Japan from the threat of the Soviet Union [1].

For some Japanese politicians, they believed that many Asian states could not expect for fair treatment from the Western countries, and they should seek their own destinies [3]. To pursue its territorial expansions in East Asia and refused to be regarded as a second-rate power, Japan quit the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. Also, between 1925 and 1928, under the banner of the Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese nationalists had begun to unite all the Chinese far-flung regions governed by the KMT Nationalist regime. However, Japanese militarists feared that under the control of the KMT Nationalist government, China would block Japanese territorial expansion into Manchuria where Japan had achieved substantial political and military influence as well as had possessed huge commercial interests [2]. Also, the Japanese elites viewed Chiang Kai-shek's a nationalist regime with its anti-imperialist rhetoric as a hostile opponent. Hence, Prime Minister established the Wang Jingwei regime, however, which on one hand completely obstructed Kanji Ishiwara's efforts toward independence and peace. On the other hand, Japan became diplomatically isolated, and the Second Sino-Japanese war was a quagmire, and the relationship between Japan and the United States was deteriorating. Japan's policy to China was based on the principle that all conflicts of the Sino-Japanese war should be settled by China and Japan directly without any intervention from other powers [4]. Also, according to a Japanese leader's radio address in 1938, Japan claimed its purpose to 'aggress' was to eradicate communistic influence, and to Collaborate with like-minded allies to reconstruct the world order. However, instead of eliminating communistic influence, the Japanese invasion boosted the development of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) [3]. Japan then signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in 1940, and then joined the military alliance [5]. Therefore, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Japan to restrain Japan's invasion and forced a military withdrawal of Japan from China as well as Manchuria. However, because of severe shortages of natural resources and oil, Japan made the decision to assault the U.S. and British forces in Asia to further dominate the power in the Pacific region, and control the resources of Southeast Asia [6,7]. Therefore, in 1941, by launching a surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, Japan entered the Pacific War [8].

From the perspective of China

In fact, the first Sino-Japanese war between China and Japan was between 1894 and 1895. With the Manchu empire declining, Japan emerged as a major power in East Asia [9]. Then, from 1937 to 1945, the second Sino-Japanese war broke out when China began a full-scale resistance to the aggression of Japan invading and its territory. Although Chiang Kai-shek gained some aid from Soviet Union leader Stalin, the KMT still received little support from foreign states. In domestic politics, KMT undertook almost the whole mission of military forces, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was barely involved in the front battle [3]. Therefore, in 1937, Chiang Kai-shek presented a petition to the signatories of the Nine-Power Treaty to help resist the invasion of Japan.

According to the statement of the Chinese government to the League of Nations in August 1937, Japan aimed at disturbing the peace of the Asian region and this behavior violated the articles of the Covenant of the League of Nations. By using war as a tool, although Japan met its national interest, it ignored the peaceful ways to solve international controversies and violated the Paris Peace Pact of 1927. Also, Japan violated the Nine-Power Treaty concluded at Washington in 1922 by showing no respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial and administrative integrity of China [10]. Therefore, Chiang Kai-shek wanted a condemnation of and economic sanctions on Japan from the League of Nations under the terms of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, however, neither the League nor the community agreed to take any steps against Japan [4].

Consequently, without any collective diplomatic policy and economic sanctions against Japan, Chiang Kai-shek was confronted with two frustrating situations: Negotiate an armistice or fight with Japanese forces [4]. However, although the Brussels Conference did not implement any measures to stop Japan's invasion of the far East, the treaty had an impact on the Battle of Songhu, which prevented the Japanese army from attacking on a large scale. In addition, a leader of the Chinese delegation, Wellington Koo, expressed his regret because those restrictive measures against Japan were not reviewed by the conference. Koo stated that all of the powers except Japan had given up the older policy of exploiting China, and that China desired to cooperate not only with Japan but also with the other states [11]. Also, Koo stated that Britain acted as China's friend, but the U.S. let them down [1].

From the perspective of Britain

When the appeal had been accepted by the League of Nations, Britain immediately began preparing for the conference. For Britain, the primary purpose of the Brussels Conference was to agree on peace. If Japan refused to attend the conference, the goal would be difficult to reach unless certain steps were taken and had favorable outcomes. Firstly, defer the actions. Secondly, put moral pressure on Japan. Thirdly, make positive actions and aid to China or impose economic sanctions against Japan [1]. To realize the implication, both U.S. and Britain should attend the conference together. On one hand, based on research, the sanctions could work if all the delegations extended them to both imports and exports, and supported China simultaneously. On the other hand, if the sanctions on Japan did succeed, there was a danger that Japan would start wars with those sanctioning states and occupy their territory for military materials. Therefore, no states would risk

imposing any sanctions unless they could gain support from other states once Japan retaliated.

Also, Britain would depend on the U.S. to address the dispute between China and Japan, and urged the U.S. government to abandon isolationism [12]. In other words, Britain wanted to make sure the U.S. would be involved in the action and made it go further.

From the perspective of the United States

In 1937, U.S. Chief executive made a speech about “quarantine,” which contained measures such as economic sanctions and long-range naval pressure [13]. However, it did not include much specific plan. Also, although Roosevelt regarded Japan as an invader, he implemented a policy that involved providing little aid to China and imposing very limited economic sanctions against Japan. The administration at the time stated that the first object of the U.S. foreign policy was national security, which meant the U.S. needed to make an effort to promote peace [14]. Also, in the U.S., administrative policy relies on public opinion. A large segment of public opinion suggested that it was not worth fighting for the far East, and the American people were not prepared to risk their lives for establishing international peace [1]. Also, based on the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the U.S. had renounced war as a tool to keep national security and showed the determination to keep out of war. Therefore, if the U.S. wanted to avoid a severe conflict with Japan, effective measures needed to be adopted to retard the Japanese conquest and promote the will of the powers to address international disputes in a peaceful way. For instance, the Conference can put moral pressure on Japan and thereby change the attitude and policy of Japan [15].

From the perspective of the Soviet Union

Because of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and the Twenty-One demands (1915), the United States was skeptical of Japan's intentions toward China and signed agreements with the Japanese government requiring Japan to commit to maintaining equality of Manchuria and the rest of China. However, with the Lansing-Ishii Agreement, which was signed during the First World War, was repealed and replaced by the Nine-Power Treaty of 1922 [16]. Since then, states agreed to respect China's independence, administrative and territorial integrity and recognize the policy of Open Door and equal opportunities. However, the Soviet Union was not included in the Nine-Power Treaty Conference of 1922 since it greatly supported and aided the KMT. Also, Japan believed that the Nine-Power Treaty of 1922 played an important role in China-Soviet Union relations, and restricted Japan's anti-communist activities. Therefore, the Soviet Union was delighted to be invited to participate in the Brussels Conference of 1937. Because the press has inferred that the reason the Nine-Power Treaty of 1922 was a failure was because of the non-invitation of the Soviet Union [17].

In addition, at the Brussels Conference, the Soviet Union expressed its tendency of participating in collective action against Japan's aggression in the far East and would adopt any measures to restrain Japan, such as boycotting Japanese goods, stoppage of credits, and prohibiting the export of materials of war to Japan, and economic aid to China directly [17].

From the international community's perspective

Some international community organizations such as the League

of Nations, have the purpose of defending the independence and territorial integrity of states. However, the League ultimately failed because of the lack of U.S. participation, and the absence of major powers such as Japan, Germany, and Italy. One of the examples is the outbreak of World War II. Also, since the Japanese full-scale aggression on China in 1937, Wellington Koo represented China to appeal to the League for international intervention. The western community showed their sympathy for the Chinese people because of their struggle, especially in the battle of Shanghai [3]. Nevertheless, the League had to turn the case over to the Brussels Conference since it was unable to offer any practical measures.

However, neither the result of the League of Nations Conference nor the Brussels Conference met China's expectations. Also, China only got less economic and military aid from Britain, France and the United States. Although Japan has always been afraid of condemnation from the international community, the consequence of these two conferences showed that the international community did not take any strict measures on Japan's aggression against China. Moreover, raw materials for strategic purposes such as oil, steel, lead, tin, aluminum and zinc that Japan needed still could be imported from some western countries.

DISCUSSION

To gain raw materials and expand political and military influence, Japan invaded China. With the severe situation in the Sino-Japanese war, Chiang Kai-shek sought help and support from the international community and the western powers were responded by attempting to mediate the situation at the Brussels Conference. However, Japan refused to participate in the conference, and claimed that it was a dispute only between China and Japan and had no relation to the Nine-Power Treaty.

From my perspective, the Brussels Conference pointed out the principles of the Nine-Power Treaty, which were the acceptable settlement between China and Japan. However, the agreement had not been reached by negotiation between these two states alone and directly. Therefore, the settlement could be achieved only by consultation with other powers together. In addition to the controversy about imposing sanctions on Japan, Brussels Conference was not merely a dispute between China and Japan, but also about what Davis referred to as “the conflict between the law-abiders and the law-breakers [1]. In fact, signatures at the Brussels Conference barely pay attention to the real situation happening in East Asia. Two days before the end of the Brussels Conference, the Chinese delegation had attempted to further persuade the U.S. to support aid to China. However, U.S. Secretary said that except for some declarations, neither military force nor economic coercion could be made. From the posture of the U.S. government, Hull's remarks showed that he adhered to the government's policy till the end of the conferences at Brussels that no economic or any other sanctions would be taken by the League powers and would not be considered as a theme for discussion at the conference.

CONCLUSION

Although delegations such as Britain and the Soviet Union had the intention to impose economic sanctions, no constructive and effective measures were provided at the conference. The emphasis on the Conference, as far as the U.S. policy was concerned, was that the actual importance of the far Eastern dispute went well beyond any direct conflict between China and Japan as well as engaged

with the whole issue itself. However, in the view of the Chinese government, Hull's remarks shut off all the possibilities of the potential actions adopted by the U.S. at the Brussels Conference.

In a nutshell, the comments about Brussels Conference are largely regarded as negative. In Ambassador Grew's opinion, the positive side is the President's speech about "quarantine" and Hull's denunciation of Japan without further action. However, the negative side is what is the meaning to convene the Nine Power Treaty Conference if there are no effective measures to be provided against Japan's aggression since the result only showed that the international community and other major powers lack unity and incapacity?

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