

The Dilemma of the League of Nations' Mediation: International Intervention and Systemic Limitations after the Mukden Incident (1931-1933)

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Abstract

Following the outbreak of the Mukden Incident on September 18th, 1931, the Nationalist Government of China appealed to the League of Nations for dispute resolution. Over the subsequent nineteen months, the League Council led a series of mediation efforts concerning the Sino-Japanese conflict, a process that can be broadly divided into three stages: initial emergency consultations, mid-term deliberation by an enlarged assembly, and a final ruling based on the Lytton Commission report. The entire mediation process was characterized by frequent meetings and voluminous, complex documentation, yet ultimately ended in complete failure with Japan's withdrawal from the League. This paper systematically examines the specific actions and decision-making logic of the League across these three stages, analyzing the structural causes of its mediation failure. It further reflects on the inherent deficiencies of the contemporary international order, the dynamics of great power politics, and the profound historical lessons this episode offers regarding the limitations of collective security mechanisms. The study concludes that the League's ineffectiveness in the wake of the Mukden Incident not only emboldened fascist aggression but also signaled the failure of the post-WWI Wilsonian idealist international order.

Keywords

League of Nations; Mukden Incident; Lytton Commission; Mediation Failure; Collective Security; Sino-Japanese Relations.

1. Introduction

On the night of September 18th, 1931, the Japanese Kwantung Army deliberately engineered the Mukden Incident, swiftly occupying vast territories of Northeast China. This event marked a significant escalation of Japan's continental policy and posed a critical test for the international collective security system established after World War I. The incident coincided with the 65th session of the Council of the League of Nations [1]. By this time, the League had grown into the largest intergovernmental organization with 63 member states, yet its power structure remained dominated by five permanent Council members: Great Britain, France, Japan, Germany, and Italy. China, serving as a non-permanent member, held limited influence. Notably, the United States, though not a member, exerted considerable influence on League decisions through its significant interests in East Asia and its special relationship with Britain and France. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, another major power excluded from the League, represented a crucial variable in the regional geopolitics. In response to the crisis, the Nanjing Government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, decided to 'appeal to the League of Nations' and formally lodged a complaint on September 21st. This diplomatic strategy stemmed from a pragmatic assessment of China's military weakness and reflected the government's attempt to utilize international law and multilateral mechanisms to constrain Japan. Thus began the League's

mediation process, which lasted from September 1931 until Japan's withdrawal in March 1933—a nineteen-month, multi-stage endeavor that represented the most significant attempt by the interwar international order to manage a regional crisis [2]. Building upon existing scholarship and utilizing archival materials from China and Japan, League proceedings, and contemporary press reports, this paper provides a systematic analysis of the League's mediation efforts and probes the underlying causes of its failure. Through this case study, we can not only glimpse the complexities of 1930s international politics but also draw instructive historical parallels for understanding the limitations of collective security mechanisms and the evolution of international order.

2. The Initial Mediation Phase

Emergency Intervention and Ineffective Resolutions (September 1931 – January 1932) China's Appeal and the League's Preliminary Response Following three days of internal deliberation after the Mukden Incident, the Nationalist Government formally decided to appeal to the League on September 21st [3]. The Chinese representative, Dr. Sao-ke Alfred Sze, in his note to League Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, detailed the Japanese military occupation of Shenyang and key communication lines since September 18th, explicitly labeling it an 'act of unprovoked aggression'. The note specifically invoked Article 11 of the Covenant, emphasizing that the incident 'endangers international peace' and urged the League to 'take immediate steps to prevent the aggravation of the situation, restore the status quo ante, and determine the nature and amount of reparations due to China'. The League Council discussed the Sino-Japanese issue at its third meeting on September 22nd. The Council President, Spanish delegate Salvador de Madariaga, proposed establishing a small committee comprising Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain to handle the matter [4]. This mechanism, dominated from the outset by European powers, reflected the League's inherent power structure. That same day, the Council issued an urgent communiqué to both China and Japan, urging them to 'refrain from any action likely to aggravate the situation or prejudice the peaceful settlement of the problem' and notably emphasizing the need to 'consult with the representatives of the two countries to enable the immediate withdrawal of the troops of both sides'. This seemingly neutral statement effectively equated the aggressor with the victim, revealing the League's conciliatory stance towards Japan in the initial phase. More tellingly, the League carefully avoided using the term 'aggression' in its early deliberations, repeatedly stressing the principle of 'not provoking Japan'. The British delegate, Lord Robert Cecil, privately remarked that 'unduly strong representations might drive Japan altogether out of the League'. This compromising mindset largely shaped the basic orientation of the League's initial mediation. The Three Resolutions and Japan's response on September 30th, the League Council passed its first formal resolution on the dispute. It merely recorded the Japanese representative's declaration of 'no territorial ambition' and naively accepted Japan's promise to withdraw its troops once the safety of Japanese nationals was secured. The resolution failed to condemn Japan's aggression or offer robust support for China's sovereign claims. A contemporary editorial in *L'Impartial* trenchantly observed, 'This resolution is akin to asking a robber to leave voluntarily after securing his loot, completely ignoring the fundamental rights of the victim'. Japan's response was to escalate its military operations. On October 8th, Japanese planes bombed Jinzhou; on October 20th, additional mixed brigades were dispatched to Manchuria; on November 4, they attacked Heilongjiang province. Faced with this escalation, the League convened a special session on October 24th and passed a second resolution demanding Japan complete its withdrawal by November 16th. This resolution received 13 votes in favor, with Japan casting the sole dissenting vote. However, due to the Covenant's unanimity rule, it failed to acquire legal force. Council President Madariaga subsequently claimed the resolution, while legally non-binding, possessed 'full moral force'. This self-deceptive statement exposed the League's institutional paralysis in the

face of blatant aggression. Significantly, China's own diplomatic strategy during this period also suffered a major misstep. On November 25th, the Nationalist Government surprisingly proposed the establishment of a 'neutral zone' in Jinzhou to the League, attempting to trade territorial sovereignty for temporary security. This near- capitulationist proposal immediately sparked nationwide protests. Students in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities demonstrated, accusing the government of 'national betrayal'. Under immense public pressure, the government was forced to retract the proposal on December 4. This episode starkly revealed the passivity and compromising nature of Chinese diplomacy at the time. On December 10th, the League passed a third resolution, deciding to dispatch an international commission of inquiry headed by the British Earl of Lytton. This move, ostensibly for an 'impartial investigation of the facts', was essentially a delaying tactic by the great powers to postpone decisive action and avoid responsibility. Japan readily accepted the commission, as it guaranteed the League would take no substantive action during the investigation, buying precious time for Japan to consolidate its military occupation of Manchuria.

3. The Expanded Mediation Phase

The Shanghai Incident and the Establishment of the Committee of Nineteen (January 1932 – September 1932) The outbreak of the Shanghai Incident and the Escalation of the League's response on January 28th, 1932, Japan instigated a new conflict by launching an attack on the Zhabei district of Shanghai [5]. The strategic purpose was clear: to divert international attention from the Manchurian issue and coerce the Chinese government into accepting the fait accompli in the Northeast. Following the incident, Chinese representative W. W. Yen immediately invoked Article 15 of the Covenant, which mandated Council involvement in disputes 'likely to lead to a rupture' and carried stronger implications than the previously used Article 11. The League's response was relatively swift. On February 16th, the Council issued an urgent appeal to Japan to 'respect the truce agreements concerning the area around the Shanghai International Settlement.' On February 19th, the Council decided to refer the Sino-Japanese question from the Council to the full Assembly of the League. This procedural change was significant: within the Assembly, Japan lost its privileged position as a permanent Council member, and numerous smaller nations gained a voice. The Special Session of the Assembly convened on March 3rd. Unlike the Council, dominated by major powers, the Assembly provided a platform for smaller states like Spain, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden to express their views. Representatives from these countries roundly condemned Japanese aggression, creating an international climate of opinion pressuring Japan. The Spanish delegate, Salvador de Madariaga, declared, 'If the League fails to stop such flagrant aggression, the very raison d'être of our organization will be fundamentally questioned.' These voices from smaller nations somewhat altered the internal balance of power within the League. The Establishment of the Committee of Nineteen and the Shanghai Truce On March 11, the Assembly decided to establish a Special Committee of Nineteen, authorizing it to handle the Sino-Japanese dispute. This committee, composed of non-permanent Council members and others elected by the Assembly, broke the permanent members' monopoly on the issue. Notably, it included countries like Czechoslovakia and Sweden, which were critical of Japan, reflecting growing dissatisfaction within the League regarding Japanese aggression [6]. Regarding Shanghai, the Committee of Nineteen demonstrated relative efficiency. It adopted a draft resolution for a ceasefire on April 29th; the Assembly unanimously passed the Shanghai resolution on April 30th; and the Shanghai Ceasefire Agreement was formally signed on May 5th. The League's relative success in Shanghai contrasted sharply with its impotence in Manchuria. This disparity stemmed both from the vested interests of multiple powers in Shanghai and Japan's limited strategic objectives there, making it amenable to compromise. However, the successful mediation in Shanghai inadvertently facilitated Japan's actions in Manchuria. While international attention

was focused on Shanghai, Japan engineered the establishment of the puppet state of 'Manchukuo' on March 1st, formally recognizing it on September 15. The League failed to take any effective countermeasures, exposing its selective interventionism in geopolitical games.

4. The Final Mediation Phase

The Lytton Commission Report and the Failure of Mediation (September 1932 – March 1933). The Formation and Work of the Lytton Commission Pursuant to the League resolution of December 10th, 1931, the Lytton Commission was formally constituted in January 1932. Besides Lord Lytton as Chairman, members included Major-General Frank Ross McCoy (USA), General Henri Claudel (France), Dr. Heinrich Schnee (Germany), and Count Luigi Aldrovandi-Marescotti (Italy). The commission's composition reflected great-power dominance, yet U.S. participation lent it a significance beyond the League framework. The Commission departed from Europe on February 3rd, conducting investigations in Tokyo, Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing (Beiping), Shenyang, Changchun, Harbin, and other locations, concluding its field work on June 4th [7]. Notably, under Japanese arrangements, the Commission remained under strict surveillance while in Manchuria, with severely restricted access to local Chinese residents. Despite this, the Commission managed to ascertain the true nature of the 'Manchukuo' regime through various channels. Lytton later admitted in his memoirs, 'What we saw and heard was sufficient to prove that 'Manchukuo' was entirely the product of the Japanese bayonet.' The Report was signed in Beiping on September 4th and published simultaneously in Geneva, Nanjing, and Tokyo on October 2nd. This lengthy document, over 100,000 words, became the cornerstone for the League's final adjudication of the dispute [8].

The Report's Contradictions and Reactions The Lytton Report exhibited significant contradictions. On one hand, it explicitly rejected Japan's primary justifications for aggression, stating that the Mukden Incident could not be regarded as 'a legitimate act of self-defence', acknowledging that the Three Eastern Provinces were "an integral part of China," and exposing that the creation of 'Manchukuo' was not the result of a 'genuine and spontaneous independence movement'. These conclusions substantially refuted Japan's official position and provided strong support for China's appeal. On the other hand, the Report was deeply imbued with colonialist logic. It proposed establishing a 'high degree of autonomous' government for Manchuria, demanded Chinese recognition of Japan's 'special interests' in the region, and advocated for the economic development of Manchuria under a framework of 'international cooperation'. These recommendations essentially aimed to establish an international condominium in Manchuria, depriving China of its sovereign rights while allowing other powers to share in the region's interests. Reactions to the Report were polarized. The Japanese government issued a lengthy statement denouncing it for 'distorting facts' and 'favoring China', threatening to withdraw from the League if it adopted the Report's suggestions. After intense internal debate, the Chinese government issued a statement on October 20th, expressing general acceptance but reserving its position on clauses regarding Manchurian autonomy. Domestic public opinion was divided: The Eastern Miscellany saw it as a 'limited diplomatic victory,' while Life Weekly criticized it as a 'blueprint for a new wave of colonialism'. The League's Final Resolution and Japan's Withdrawal on February 21st, 1933, the League convened a special Assembly to deliberate on the Lytton Report. The final report drafted by the Committee of Nineteen largely adopted the Commission's main conclusions, explicitly declared non-recognition of 'Manchukuo', and called for the withdrawal of Japanese troops to the railway zones. On February 24th, the Assembly voted: 42 in favor, Japan opposed, and Siam (Thailand) abstaining. According to the Covenant, the resolution was adopted. Japanese representative Yōsuke Matsuoka declared that 'Japan and the League were fundamentally divided in their views on Far Eastern issues' and led his delegation out of the hall [9]. On March 27th, the Japanese government formally notified the League of its withdrawal. This act marked the complete

failure of the League's mediation and signaled the collapse of the post-Washington Treaty system. Adding profound irony, even as the Assembly voted, Japanese forces were launching a full-scale invasion of Rehe (Jehol) province. Chengde fell on March 4th, and the entire province was occupied by early April. The League's moral verdict appeared utterly feeble in the face of Japan's military advance, serving as the ultimate mockery of the concept of collective security.

5. Historical Reflection

A Multidimensional Analysis of the Underlying Causes of Mediation Failure Structural Flaws in the League Mechanism the League's failure in mediating the Mukden Incident stemmed primarily from fundamental flaws in its institutional design. The Covenant's unanimity rule, particularly within the Council, granted de facto veto power to permanent members, allowing Japan to single-handedly block resolutions against its interests. Furthermore, the League lacked effective enforcement mechanisms, its resolutions relying heavily on member states' voluntary cooperation and 'moral pressure.' When confronting a determined aggressor like Japan, such a weak sanctions regime proved inevitably ineffective. The deeper issue was that the League remained essentially an organization dominated by great powers. When handling the Far Eastern crisis, Britain and France prioritized their national interests over international justice. British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon privately conceded, 'Our interest in the Far East lies in maintaining good relations with Japan, not in defending a weak China.' Such realist calculations prevented the League from forming a collective will to curb aggression. Great Power Strategic Calculations and Appeasement Analyzing the positions of individual great powers reveals complex strategic calculations. Britain, mired in the Great Depression, pursued a policy of 'avoiding conflict with Japan' in the Far East, even hoping to use Japan to counterbalance growing U.S. influence in the Pacific [10]. France, preoccupied with European affairs, adopted a policy of 'following Britain's lead' in the Far East. The United States, though not a League member, expressed its position through the 'Stimson Doctrine of Non-Recognition,' yet President Herbert Hoover explicitly stated the U.S. 'would not go to war over Manchuria.' The Soviet Union seized the opportunity to improve relations with Japan, even considering recognition of 'Manchukuo' in exchange for Japanese recognition of its neutral status. These self-serving policies by the great powers created a de facto atmosphere of appeasement towards Japan. The Japanese military accurately judged this international disunity and weakness, enabling it to continuously escalate its aggression. Ishiwara Kanji, a key Kwantung Army staff officer, noted in a memorandum: 'The Western powers will absolutely not go to war with Japan over the Manchurian problem. Their protests will ultimately remain on paper.' The Impact of Domestic Politics in China and Japan From the Chinese perspective, the Nationalist Government's policy of 'relying on the League' was based on a misjudgment of the international situation. Chiang Kai-shek wrote in his diary in September 1931, 'The world's justice will eventually prevail; we must only endure and wait for the right moment.' This passive strategy caused China to miss the optimal window for organizing effective resistance [11]. Concurrently, domestic political instability and factional strife weakened China's diplomatic leverage. During the League's mediation, the Nanjing-Canton split and debates over prioritizing resistance against Japan versus suppressing the Communists prevented China from presenting a unified diplomatic front. In Japan, the weakness of party cabinets contrasted sharply with the military's insubordination. Prime Minister Wakatsuki Reijirō had expressed willingness to accept some League proposals, but the military threatened a coup. The Inukai Tsuyoshi cabinet, formed in December 1931, attempted to restrain the Kwantung Army but was overthrown in the May 15 Incident of 1932. Thereafter, Japan slid irrevocably towards militarism, closing the door on a diplomatic settlement. Limitations of the International Legal System the Mukden Incident also posed a severe test for the inter-state legal system. Contemporary international law contained significant ambiguities in defining 'aggression' and regulating acts of war. Japan skillfully

exploited these legal loopholes, packaging its military actions as ‘exercises of the right of self-defence’, ‘incidents rather than war’, and creating a façade of ‘self-determination’ for ‘Manchukuo’. The powerlessness of international law in the face of power politics was starkly exposed in this episode [12].

6. Conclusion

The failure of the League of Nations' mediation following the September 18th Incident offers profound lessons for the world. Firstly, it proved that any collective security mechanism, lacking the sincere cooperation of major powers and effective means of enforcement, is ultimately doomed to remain empty talk. Secondly, international law and multilateral institutions possess an inherent fragility in the face of power politics; the fundamental guarantee of a nation's security still lies in its own strength and resolve. For China, this experience compelled all sectors of society to rethink the ‘path to national salvation’ and accelerated the formation of a nationwide consensus on resisting Japan.

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