

**“The Best Possible Time for War?”  
The USS Panay and American Far Eastern Policy  
During the Roosevelt Presidency**

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**ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines American Far Eastern policy from the beginning of the Franklin Roosevelt presidency through the early months of 1938. This study is chiefly concerned with the attack by Japanese aircraft on the *USS Panay* and its effect on the course of U.S. foreign policy. Particular attention is paid to the Anglo-American dialogue which occurred throughout the Far Eastern Crisis. Prior to the end of 1938, the U.S. administration's position in Asia was dictated both by policies inherited from preceding administrations and by the extreme isolationism of the American people. This foundation effectively inhibited any cooperation with foreign powers. Relying on a reactive policy in the Far East, Washington remained aloof from entanglement as the President sought a plan which would permit U.S. involvement without inviting isolationist wrath. This paper traces an evolution in American Far Eastern policy, highlighting the *Panay* incident as a distinctly identifiable turning point whereby isolationism gave way to internationalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

On December 12, 1937, Universal News war correspondent Norman Alley, who had a reputation for documenting armed conflict under perilous conditions, found himself on the deck of the *USS Panay*. Later recalling that he must “do something about getting photographic records of this for [his] government, the American people, and the civilized world,” Alley shot footage of Japanese planes repeatedly assaulting the American vessel and the convoy of ships it was protecting. His footage captured the dramatic battle in its entirety, including Chief Ernest Mahlmann’s courageous effort to return fire with the *Panay*’s machine guns despite being naked from the waist down. This film destined to become an important piece of Court of Inquiry evidence declaring the event to be an unlawful and fully intentional Japanese attack upon the American vessel.<sup>1</sup>

The attack on the *Panay* and the death of several sailors inspired a marked increase in East-West tensions. China and Japan had skirmished repeatedly since 1931, with the full-scale outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in July 1937 resulting in Japan’s military seizing territory for the expansionist Japanese Empire. Though it was a struggle between regional neighbours, the conflict had serious global implications, attracting the close attention of Western Powers. Caught up in the conflict were numerous assets held by Britain and the U.S., both of whom had little to gain and much to lose from a war that turned attention away from growing German power in Europe.

Despite being allied in the Great War, Britain and the United States did not see eye to eye on the Far East after 1918. The two had struggled to find common ground there since Woodrow Wilson had campaigned to create the League of Nations. With its larger economic presence in China, Britain understood the importance of its Asian assets and was

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<sup>1</sup> *U.S.S. Panay Memorial Website*, <http://www.usspanay.org/index.shtml>

determined to protect them. However, it grew increasingly nervous over Germany's rising menace and was forced to admit that the Far East problems could not be solved without help. The American government had a different appreciation of the Far East. While it was generally concerned by the threat presented by aggressor states, in particular Germany, Italy and Japan, Japan's attack upon China was felt keenly in the State Department because of the relationship between the Far East, the Open Door Policy and the Nine-Power Treaty, one of the Department's crowning achievements in the preceding decade. However, while the Franklin Roosevelt administration sympathized with China's plight and respected the potential value of financial markets in China, Washington was unwilling to commit the significant resources required to ensure long-term security there. The U.S. was unprepared militarily and an isolationist American public was adamantly opposed to military build-up or action anywhere in the world. This was especially true for distant and unfamiliar regions such as China which were not seen as integral to America's prosperity. Public isolationism limited the extent to which even globally minded American leaders could partake in an internationalist agenda without facing serious political backlash.

But the growing scale of the Asian conflict and its effect on private U.S. involvement in the region meant that the U.S. could not avoid being drawn into deliberations, especially as Washington was repeatedly approached by Chinese representatives seeking support. As the conflict progressed, it forced U.S. policy makers to constantly readjust their stance on American involvement, particularly the extent to which the U.S. was willing to take the lead in major international discussions on the issue. Anglo-American relations were repeatedly tested as the two governments looked for common ground for ending the war while addressing independent concerns. This cooperation would prove difficult as neither side

showed a willingness to alter their proposed solutions. Ultimately, it would take a major international incident, the attack upon the *Panay*, to destabilize American Far Eastern policy and afford the Administration an opportunity to choose a course of action regarding neutrality and cooperation with the British.

Numerous studies have explored the subject of American Far Eastern policy during the inter-war years. The rising tide of fascism felt so keenly in Europe was no less potent in East Asia where the Japanese Empire set out on a campaign to win total domination. As the situation developed through the 1920s and 1930s, American policy vis-à-vis China and Japan was repeatedly tested as Washington was forced to adapt to hostility abroad despite a populace set against involvement in a world seemingly hell-bent on violent confrontation. Seeking to understand this period, scholars have traced the history of an evolving set of foreign policies which underwent gradual but constant change over nearly twenty years.

One of the earliest scholarly works examining this subject, A. Whitney Griswold's *The Far Eastern Policy of the United States*, provided a solid review of American policy from the enunciation of the Open Door to the outbreak of war in China.<sup>2</sup> Published several years before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Griswold's work was understandably less critical of Japan. While shying away from open criticism of American policies, he suggested two things: that U.S. decisions were based upon a crisis yet developing; and that Japan suffered more at the hands of U.S. intervention in Asia than the U.S. did from Japan in the West. Though seriously limited by the lack of available sources, Griswold observed with frank realism that the Roosevelt administration had a tendency to observe a '24-hour' policy with little long-term consistency or direction.

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<sup>2</sup> Griswold, A.W., *Far Eastern Policy of the United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938)

In the decade following the Second World War, the trend in scholarly literature was to search for causes of the war. In his 1950 work, *The Road to Pearl Harbor, the Coming of the War between the United States and Japan*, Herbert Feis, a State Department officer, took an early realist position by arguing that the war was inevitable, ultimately brought on by mutual failures in grand diplomacy, notably the Washington and London Naval Conferences.<sup>3</sup> Like other realist perspectives, Feis' work generally supported the actions of American policy makers and placed a strong emphasis on the effects of their decisions rather than investigating the issues that steered the process. This strain of scholarly literature was not without its opponents, however. Feis' contemporary, Charles Tansill, assumed a revisionist position challenging the bloated sense of importance that realist authors often prescribed to American actions. His work, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941*, asserted that responsibility for the outbreak of the war lay in the failings of Franklin Roosevelt who repeatedly goaded the Japanese into a war they did not desire.<sup>4</sup> Where some realist theories can be faulted for being too focused on the American perspective and the importance of Washington decisions, Tansill was borderline polemical in his arguments, making every effort to convince his audience that blame rested at the feet of American decision makers. While not all revisionist works bear such ardent distaste for American policy, it is clear that much of the scholarly literature in the twenty-five years following the war falls on either side of a dividing line between placing an emphasis on American involvement and making every effort to do the opposite.

Nowhere is this divide more pronounced than in the only two works specifically dedicated to an analysis of the *Panay* incident. *The Panay Incident: Prelude to War*, written

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<sup>3</sup> Feis, Herbert, *The Road to Pearl Harbor: The Coming of the War Between the United States and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950)

<sup>4</sup> Tansill, Charles, *Back door to war: the Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (Chicago: H. Regnary Co., 1952)



by Manny T. Koginos in 1967, argued that the event was a major turning point for Japanese-American relations, assuming a typically realist position.<sup>5</sup> Koginos argued that President Roosevelt was not eager to go to war, constrained as he was by an isolationist public opposed to foreign conflict. The repercussions of the *Panay* incident could have been far more severe had the American reaction been less tempered, likely resulting in a Pacific war beginning nearly four years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Two years later, Hamilton Perry contended the opposite position in *The Panay Incident: Prelude to Pearl Harbor*.<sup>6</sup> He asserted that the American public was unwilling to back down over the incident and that only a quickly devised Japanese apology averted a serious conflagration. The fact that the only two analyses on exactly the same subject could come to two distinctly different conclusions serves to demonstrate the larger divisions within the study of American foreign policy. Unfortunately, it is also worth noting that both sources possess significant flaws, limiting their usefulness to any historian seeking to understand the broader implications of the *Panay* incident. Koginos' work has no sources outside America, limiting his capacity to answer questions on Japan's motivation for the attacks or even the nature of American diplomatic exchanges surrounding the event. Perry's work, more journalistic than scholarly, placed a strong emphasis on eyewitness accounts of the attack. While making a strong argument, his omission of any listed sources negates his credibility and leaves the audience without conviction.

With the debate between realists and revisionists growing old, the 1970s and 1980s saw a major outpouring of scholarly literature that continues to this day. Assuming a more balanced position, this post-revisionist school of thought contends that the Sino-Japanese

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<sup>5</sup> Koginos, Manny, *The Panay Incident: Prelude to War* (Lafayette: Purdue University Studies, 1967)

<sup>6</sup> Perry, Hamilton D., *The Panay Incident: Prelude to Pearl Harbor* (New York: MacMillan, 1969)

War and the Pacific War were as much a result of radical extremism within the Japanese military regime as a result of any decision-making process by the Western Powers. The seminal work on American Far Eastern Policy during the crisis years of the 1930s, Dorothy Borg's *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938* remains an essential piece for any historian seeking to understand America's reaction to the outbreak of hostilities in China.<sup>7</sup> The first work of its magnitude to deal exclusively with U.S. Far Eastern diplomacy during the 1930s, Borg argued that the Roosevelt administration had no intention of becoming involved in a war, going so far as to avoid providing financial support for China and cooperation with the League of Nations, lest those actions precipitate a greater conflict with Japan. Unlike earlier scholars, Borg placed equal emphasis on internal and external factors contributing to Washington's decisions, weighing in on the affects of public isolationism and the administration's internationalist bent. The work ends with the most thorough discussion of the *Panay* found outside those of Koginos and Perry, concluding that the incident coincided with a significant change in American diplomacy.

The second pillar for those studying U.S. East Asian policy is Robert Dallek's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945*.<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive dissection of FDR's foreign policy, Dallek's study had much to say about America's pre-war Far Eastern relations despite having a much wider scale. Though an in-depth examination of events such as the *Panay* crisis was beyond the scope of his piece, Dallek did an admirable job of making sense of Roosevelt's oft-muddled foreign policy and the multitude of problems that complicated the President's response to Japanese aggression. He made one

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<sup>7</sup> Borg, Dorothy, *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964)

<sup>8</sup> Dallek, Robert, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)

point consistently throughout – that even though the President had the final word, American foreign policy was more the result of a vast array of influential politicians and bureaucrats, often working in opposition, than it was the work of any one man. This theme continued in Jonathan Utley's *Going to War with Japan, 1937-1941*.<sup>9</sup> In this book, which extends Borg's dissection of the years 1933-1938, Utley contended that Cordell Hull was the central figure in establishing Far Eastern policy. The Secretary of State, he argued, was trapped between the policies he had inherited from his predecessors and the realities of his own time, a period in which isolationism inhibited his own desire to defend American interests in China.

As the post-revisionist school of thought more completely covered the fundamentals of American foreign policy, it expanded internationally to include more detailed studies on American bilateral relations. British historian Greg Kennedy's work, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations and the Far East, 1933-1939*, sought to bridge the historiographical gap by examining the repeated attempts at cooperation made by Britain and the U.S. throughout the Far Eastern Crisis.<sup>10</sup> Like Utley, Kennedy examined the relationships between policy makers below the Presidential and Prime Ministerial level, persuasively arguing that these relationships drove policy making at senior levels. Perhaps unexpectedly, the field of Anglo-American relations during the 1930s is one of consensus among authors who generally agree that the relationship between America and Great Britain was not as smooth as it superficially appeared. Most, however, agree with Kennedy's conclusion that although there was mistrust between British and American officials, both countries valued the alliance on a professional level, ensuring closer Anglo-American cooperation.

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<sup>9</sup> Utley, Jonathan, *Going to war with Japan, 1937-1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1985)

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, Greg, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations and the Far East, 1933-1939: Imperial Crossroads* (London; Portland: Frank Cass, 2002)

As the study of American foreign policy advances and becomes more comprehensive, some details get overlooked for a time. In addressing a specific event such as the *Panay* incident, not studied exclusively since the 1960s, it becomes possible to reinterpret the event within the more comprehensive framework of modern history. This paper seeks to re-examine the *Panay* incident, applying a more balanced, post-revisionist perspective by taking into consideration the broader context of American foreign policy during the Far Eastern Crisis. Chapter I will analyze the period between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Franklin Roosevelt presidency, during which the U.S. Government established the foundation for its early Far Eastern policy. Chapter II will examine the early years of Roosevelt's presidency during which he established Secretary of State Cordell Hull as the principle decision maker in America's East Asian policies. It will clearly identify that America and its chief ally, Great Britain, had different priorities which subsequently hindered cooperation in matters pertaining to Asia and the Pacific. In Chapter III, this paper will investigate the evolution of those policies enacted by the Roosevelt administration in response to the rapid deterioration of the situation in China. Specifically, it will argue that President Roosevelt did not possess an active strategy for the Far East as he was held back by isolationist public opinion. Instead, Washington relied on Hull's application of American principles and policies established during previous decades. This allowed the President to pursue an ambiguous plan designed to educate the American people on the broader benefits of internationalism. Chapter IV will then demonstrate how the attack on the *USS Panay* influenced America's Far Eastern policy. It will argue that the incident strengthened internationalism in the U.S. and was instrumental in the Government's triumph over domestic isolationism. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that the *Panay* incident, an

inflammatory event with no obvious counterpart in American history, was a turning point which gave President Roosevelt the confidence and motivation he needed to engage in active foreign policy.

**CHAPTER I**  
**IN SEARCH OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY**

Following World War I, the prevailing sentiment among nations was that it must not happen again. The first step toward this end was the Treaty of Versailles establishing the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. As the brainchild of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, the League was conceived in the hope that collective security would deter aggressive nations from waging war. While noble in its goals, the Conference was rife with disagreement, seriously undermining Wilson's vision of the League and negatively affecting its ability to effect global change.

A contentious issue at the Conference was the persistent absence of Far East cooperation. A.W. Griswold argued that political animosity between Japan and the United States was a direct result of World War I. The war had been a European phenomenon, affecting the Far East only insofar as warring factions possessed economic and territorial interests in the region. By preoccupying European powers, the conflict had shifted the Far East balance toward the two greatest non-European powers, Japan and the United States. Recognizing an unparalleled opportunity for expansion, Japan declared war on Germany in August 1914 and occupied the German territory of Kiaochow in China three months later. Despite a Chinese request for intervention on its behalf, the United States did not oppose Japan, fearing this would lead to open conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Noting America's unwillingness to actively defend its Open Door Policy, Japan presented its Twenty-One Demands to China in January 1915. The Demands included articles pertaining to subjects such as Japan's exclusive acquisition of economic rights in the Shantung Peninsula, rights of extraterritoriality within Manchuria and Eastern Mongolia,

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<sup>11</sup> Griswold, pp 178-184

limitations on China's capacity to deal with foreign powers, the right to give "advice" to the Chinese government, and the maintenance of key supervisory powers over Chinese political institutions.<sup>12</sup> While the Demands illustrated Japan's willingness to maintain a semblance of Western-style diplomacy rather than launching an outright invasion, they also illustrated Tokyo's ambitions to rule China at the expense of Chinese nationalism.

American officials perceived the Demands as "the greatest crisis yet experienced in China," threatening "the independence of China and the equal opportunity of Western Nations," and further antagonizing Japanese-American relations.<sup>13</sup> The State Department, asserting the Demands violated the Open Door as well as previous bilateral agreements between Japan and the United States, considered them a denial of Japan's professed desire to maintain peace in the Far East.<sup>14</sup> America's capacity to act, however, was limited, in part due to the difficulty in using force against Japan, and in part from a developing controversy over anti-Japanese legislation in Oregon, Idaho and California.<sup>15</sup> Wilson's foreign policy advisor Edward "Colonel" House cautioned that the United States was not in a position to go to war with Japan over the Open Door.<sup>16</sup> The President avoided any major action, opting to express American disapproval via an inoffensive letter to Japan reiterating various treaties and agreements guaranteeing American rights throughout the Far East.<sup>17</sup> In the absence of more enthusiastic international support, China was forced to accept most of the Twenty-One

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<sup>12</sup> *Chinese Minister to the Secretary of State*, United States State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers [FRUS]* 1915, Vol. 1, pp 93-95

<sup>13</sup> *Minister Reinsch to the Secretary of State*, 24 January 1915, *FRUS* 1915, Vol. 1, p 80

<sup>14</sup> *Edward Thomas Williams to William Jennings Bryan*, 27 January 1915, in Wilson, Woodrow, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. by Arthur S. Link. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-1994) Vol. 32, pp 135-136

<sup>15</sup> Lansing, Robert, *The War Memoirs of Robert Lansing*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935) pp 282-283

<sup>16</sup> *From the Diary of Colonel House*, 25 January 1915, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 32, p 120

<sup>17</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador of Japan*, 13 March 1915, *FRUS* 1915, Vol. 1, pp 105-111

Demands, although it did prevent Japan from gaining a direct hand in the workings of the Chinese government.<sup>18</sup>

When it learned of China's accession to the Demands, the United States issued a draft note of "non-recognition", averring that the United States would not recognize any treaty changes which might adversely affect American rights, the Open Door Policy, or China's territorial and administrative integrity.<sup>19</sup> The note, written by State Department Counsellor Robert Lansing, was intended as a stop-gap measure to delay a more thorough debate until the war ended, thus allowing other western powers to become involved in the discussion. However, in 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. In exchange for a guarantee that it would attend the post-war peace conference, China was convinced to do the same. This annoyed Japan which felt that China, by associating itself with the Allies against Germany, would then claim the war had annulled Germany's lease of Shantung, thus restoring China's sovereignty over the province.<sup>20</sup>

Desperate to maintain civility with Japan until the war ended, the United States expanded upon now Secretary of State Lansing's earlier note. In these Lansing-Ishii Notes, Japan promised to uphold the Open Door and to make no further demands on China in return for American recognition of Japan's "special interests" in the region.<sup>21</sup> The entire series of events, from the presentation of the Twenty-One Demands to the establishment of the Lansing-Ishii Notes, set the stage for a conference in which the United States would serve as mediator for Japan and China.

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<sup>18</sup> *Minister Reinsch to the Secretary of State*, 9 May 1915, *FRUS* 1915, Vol. 1, p 145

<sup>19</sup> *The Secretary of State to Ambassador Guthrie*, 11 May 1915, *FRUS* 1915, Vol. 1, p 146

<sup>20</sup> Lansing, *War Memoirs*, pp 284-290

<sup>21</sup> *Agreement Effected By Exchange of Notes Between the United States and Japan*, 2 November 1917, *FRUS* 1917, Vol. 1, pp 264-265



Because the Paris Peace Conference was primarily geared toward resolving European concerns, it dealt with Far Eastern issues in a supplementary fashion. Caught up in efforts to shackle German ambitions, European powers lacked the diplomatic ammunition to seriously involve themselves in the Far East. Japan, however, came to the Conference armed with China's legal agreement to many of the Twenty-One Demands, the Lansing-Ishii exchange, and a 1918 agreement struck with China in which the latter unconditionally ceded Kiaochow and Germany's former rights in Shantung to Japan in return for railway loans.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, while the Japanese were cognizant of the American bias towards China, they could rely on the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, signed in 1902 and renewed in 1905 and 1911, as strong assurance of British support to counter American resistance. In addition, a separate 1914 agreement had bound Britain to support Japan's demands for the Shantung Peninsula at the postwar Peace Conference.<sup>23</sup> These agreements all seriously threatened China's position in Paris despite pro-Chinese domestic opinion in the United States.

The Chinese delegation, lead by the nationalist Wellington Koo, immediately set about cultivating its only hope of treaty revision, securing international sympathy for its cause. In an impassioned address as "the spokesman of one-quarter of the human race," Koo succeeded in garnering tremendous popular support from the international community, further compounding the dilemma for Wilson who still had to deal with Japan's diplomats despite growing anti-Japanese sentiment at the conference. Ironically, however, it would not be the debate over territorial or economic rights that decided the outcome, but a separate issue upon which the Chinese and Japanese undoubtedly agreed.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Griswold, pp 240-241

<sup>23</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Shantung Treaties and Agreements* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1921) p 82

<sup>24</sup> Griswold, pp 244-245

The only major Japanese proposal at the conference that did not involve territorial or economic rights concerned racial equality. With American assistance, Japan had drafted an amendment to the League Covenant suggesting that no distinction be made between nationals of any member state based on race or nationality. The amendment, created largely in response to increasingly discriminatory laws facing Japanese aliens in California, challenged many of the notions of white superiority upheld by Western powers, particularly the British Empire. The Chief of the State Department Far Eastern Division opined that the amendment would provide a quid pro quo Japanese concession to Chinese requests for dominion over the Shantung Peninsula. Despite this, Great Britain, at the urging of the Australian delegation, steadfastly opposed it. Supported as it was by France and Italy, the amendment may still have passed if not for a last-minute decision by Wilson who, unwilling to alienate himself from Britain, had his contingent abstain. When a majority emerged in favour, Wilson ruled against adopting the amendment because it had failed to pass with a sufficient majority.<sup>25</sup>

Incensed, Japan threatened to withdraw from the Conference altogether. Fearing this would damage the League, Wilson allowed Japan's territorial demands in China to be penned into the Treaty of Versailles. The Chinese, believing that the great powers sought to jointly subjugate China,<sup>26</sup> predictably refused to sign and began boycotting Japanese goods, rapidly escalating tensions between China and Japan in a series of events that became known as the May Fourth Movement. Historian Walter LaFeber cited Wilson's failure on the

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<sup>25</sup> Griswold, pp 248-250

<sup>26</sup> Griswold, pp 251-254

Shantung issue as a key reason for the U.S. Senate's later failure to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the ultimate crippling of the League of Nations.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of the Paris Peace debacle, it was necessary to pursue a modified version of Wilsonian foreign policy. This second effort was presided over by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes of the W.G. Harding Republican administration: the Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armament, held from November 12, 1921 to February 6, 1922.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the Paris Peace Conference, this gathering placed special emphasis on the problems of the Pacific and the Far East. Discussions featured an increased role for Japan as it joined the United States and Great Britain as one of the three leading powers in the region. Believing that increased Japanese participation was essential given heightened concerns over Japanese ambitions in Asia,<sup>29</sup> Britain and America looked to the Conference as an opportunity to reign in those ambitions and restore the pre-war status quo in the Far East.

For Hughes, the conference's ultimate goal was to limit military spending, particularly between Japan, Britain and the U.S., in order to prevent a costly and unpopular naval arms race similar to that contributing to the outbreak of the Great War. However, the United States also sought other Japanese concessions. A major issue was the Anglo-Japanese Alliance which had dictated British policy in the Far East since 1902. In July 1921, the United States indicated its disapproval of the alliance, stating that "renewal of [the] Anglo-Japanese Alliance or [the] establishment of any special relations between [the] British and [the] Japanese would create [an] unfavourable impression not only in the mind of [the] American people, but in that of the United States Government." The American government

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<sup>27</sup> LaFeber, Walter, "Before Pearl Harbor," in *Current History*, 57(336) (Aug. 1969) pp 65-70

<sup>28</sup> Perkins, Dexter, *Charles Evans Hughes and American Democratic Statesmanship*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1956) Ch. 1, Ch. 3

<sup>29</sup> Iriye, Akira, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East 1921-1931*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) p 14

was concerned that the alliance encouraged Britain to aid Japan should any conflict occur between America and Japan.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in Canada, England's senior dominion, "there was a genuine alarm that relations with America would be unfavourably affected" by a renewal of the alliance.<sup>31</sup>

For Great Britain, deciding to terminate the alliance was a matter of weighing pros and cons. On the positive side, it offered Britain insurance against future Russian threats by means of Anglo-Japanese encirclement, reducing the need for Britain to maintain complete naval equality with the United States.<sup>32</sup> The Japanese fleet challenging the American presence in the Pacific obliged Britain to maintain only an equivalent Atlantic fleet. In either case, terminating the alliance would force Great Britain to expend more resources to buttress its Pacific presence.<sup>33</sup> On the negative side, Britain was allied to a power it could not fully trust. Japan had failed to gain the faith of many Western observers who felt it had frequently acted in disregard of the spirit of the alliance during the Paris Peace negotiations. Britain could neither contain nor coerce Japan. Moreover, given Britain's considerable investments in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan's aggressive tendencies towards China bred disdain and fear.<sup>34</sup>

Further complicating the decision was China's growing nationalism which put significant pressure upon Britain by boycotting goods and holding protests in British ports. This put Britain in a position where maintaining good diplomatic relations with other foreign

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<sup>30</sup> Sir A. Geddes to Marquess Curzon, July 6 1921, Woodward, E. L. and Rohan Butler, ed. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939 [DBFP]*, Ser. 2, Vol. 14, p 326, Marquess Curzon to Sir C. Eliot, July 8, 1921. *DBFP* 1919-1939, Ser. 2, Vol. 14, p 332

<sup>31</sup> Marquess Curzon to Sir C. Eliot, July 8 1921. *DBFP* 1919-1939, Ser. 2, Vol. 14, p 331

<sup>32</sup> Fry, Michael G., *Illusions of Security: North Atlantic Diplomacy 1918-1922*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) pp 68-69

<sup>33</sup> Lowe, Peter, *Britain in the Far East: A Survey from 1819 to the Present*, (New York: Longman Inc, 1981) p 116

<sup>34</sup> Fry, p 69

powers in China became essential to maintaining dominance over the Chinese.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the British had to maintain good trade relations with Japan even if the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was terminated to satisfy American concerns. Finding a solution which did not offend the Japanese would be difficult. Britain could retain the pact and thus its own alignment with Japan, perpetuating an established policy permitting some British control in Tokyo while providing security for imperial interests. But this option would likely antagonize the United States. Alternatively, Britain could align itself more closely with the United States by negotiating a naval agreement and establishing Anglo-American cooperation in the Far East. This was also risky: The U.S. was an unproven partner with a track record of isolationism while the necessary cessation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance could embitter Japan and make it even less cooperative. Neither of these two options pleased British officials.<sup>36</sup>

A more favourable approach to assuaging American concerns while maintaining good relations with Japan was to bring America into the fold of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, thus making it a tripartite agreement. Britain then could adopt a middle position between friend and ally, retaining its link to Japan while building bridges with America.<sup>37</sup> Hughes, concerned that such an arrangement would allow Japan and Great Britain to present a unified front against American initiatives, pushed to include France as well, resulting in the first treaty of the Washington Conference, the Four-Power Treaty.<sup>38</sup> Each party agreed to maintain the existing status quo in the Pacific, to respect each other's rights in relation to holdings in the Pacific, to consult with each other in any territorial dispute, and to make no

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<sup>35</sup> Lowe, pp 116-117

<sup>36</sup> Fry, pp 69-70

<sup>37</sup> Fry, p 70

<sup>38</sup> Griswold, pp 305-311

efforts to expand territorially.<sup>39</sup> While vague enough to leave room for political manoeuvring, the treaty ensured that all global powers possessing navies capable of menacing the Pacific were under mutual agreement not to rock the boat.

Beyond the Four-Power agreement, the Washington Conference involved two parallel discussions – the Five-Power Conference on Disarmament and the Nine-Power Conference on the Pacific and Far East – which yielded two more treaties that would significantly affect Far East politics in the next decade and a half. Having achieved a form of political unity with Japan and Great Britain, Hughes felt free to pursue his primary objective of naval disarmament. Proposing the cessation of all capital ship building and adjusting naval strength based on existing tonnage, Hughes called for the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy, the largest naval powers, to pledge to maintain a capital ship ratio of 5-5-3-1.75-1.75 respectively.<sup>40</sup> Although Hughes based these ratios on existing naval strength and specific national defence needs, not everyone liked his conclusions. Admiral Tomosaburo Kato, Minister of the Navy and head of the Japanese delegation, argued that Japan's unique geographical position required a greater ratio for defense.<sup>41</sup> He was unable to sway Hughes, however, and Japan ultimately agreed to sign the Five-Power Treaty in exchange for an agreement prohibiting the other powers from further fortifying their territorial assets in the Pacific.<sup>42</sup> This was a concession of so little concern to the U.S. that one member of the American delegation, Colonel Theodore Roosevelt Jr., quipped that the deal left America “in a slightly better position than Japan. We trade certain

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<sup>39</sup> *Treaty between the United States of America, the British Empire, France and Japan*, 13 December 1921, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/tr1921.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/tr1921.asp)

<sup>40</sup> *Proposal for a Limitation of Naval Armament, Presented by the Secretary of State at the First Plenary Session of the Conference*, November 12, 1921. *FRUS* 1922, Vol. 1, pp 53-56

<sup>41</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan*. *FRUS* 1922, Vol. 1, pp 64-65

<sup>42</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan to the Secretary of State*. *FRUS* 1922, Vol. 1, p 88

fortifications, which we would never have completed, for fortifications which they would unquestionably have completed. We retain one outpost in the Pacific of great importance [Hawaii] and they give up all but their mainland.”<sup>43</sup> While many Japanese militants anguished over what they felt was the coercion of Japan by the West, as a moderate government in Tokyo dictated Japan’s foreign policy, the agreement went forward.<sup>44</sup>

While the Four and Five-Power Treaties together represented important changes for world politics by reinforcing the status quo in the Far East and encouraging international disarmament, the pact which had the greatest effect on the subsequent decade was the Nine-Power Treaty. In its first article, the signatories, which had grown to include China, Belgium, Portugal and the Netherlands, agreed to respect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, to give China “the fullest and most unembarrassed opportunity” to “develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable government,” and to “refrain from taking advantage of conditions in China in order to seek special rights or privileges which would abridge the rights of subjects or citizens of friendly states, and from countenancing action inimical to the security of such states.” Furthermore, they pledged to respect the commercial opportunities afforded by the Open Door Policy and to cooperate and confer with each other on issues concerning China.<sup>45</sup>

The Nine-Power Treaty was an important step for the United States. While it did little to alter China’s political scenery and was meant to maintain the status quo, it marked the first time that traditional American foreign policy was recorded as international law. It

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<sup>43</sup> Perras, Galen, *Stepping Stones to Nowhere: The Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and American Military Strategy, 1867-1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003) pp 12-13

<sup>44</sup> Doerr, Paul W., *British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) p 63

<sup>45</sup> *Treaty Between the United States of America, Belgium, The British Empire, China, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal, Signed at Washington*, 6 February 1922, [http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/pre-war/9\\_power.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/pre-war/9_power.html)

clearly highlighted the maintenance of China's integrity as the keystone to preserving the Open Door, and emphasized that long-term success in the region relied upon binding international obligation among all powers concerned. However, while the Nine-Power treaty presented a unified and legally binding acknowledgement of the importance of the Open Door and China's territorial integrity, its impact was negligible. As A.W. Griswold described it, "It was a self-denying ordinance rather than a collective security pact. The only sanction behind it was the good faith of its signatories."<sup>46</sup> The Treaty did not bind any signatory to defend China and the Open Door, a serious oversight in retrospect.

The Washington Conference was not the last inter-war effort concerning disarmament. A second naval conference initiated by President Calvin Coolidge in Geneva in 1927 sought to extend the system of capital ship tonnages conceived in 1921-22 to cover smaller vessels. But the conference was a spectacular failure that emphasized the problems associated with rivalry between naval powers and particularly between Britain and the United States. The latter disagreed on the issue of cruiser limitation. Wanting a large fleet of light cruisers to enforce maritime concerns throughout its empire, Britain believed the U.S. sought a powerful navy for prestige rather than genuine defensive application. The U.S., desiring a smaller fleet of well-armed heavy cruisers to safeguard American shipping, contended that Britain wanted only to perpetuate its naval preponderance over America.<sup>47</sup> The result was a deadlock - there were shouting matches - and no deal was reached.

A year later, on August 27, 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed by several countries including Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States. They formally renounced war as an instrument of national policy and agreed that disputes

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<sup>46</sup> Griswold, p 326

<sup>47</sup> McKercher, B.J.C., "Between Two Giants", in B.J.C. McKercher ed. *Anglo American Relations in the 1920s*. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1990) pp 105-106



between one another would be resolved exclusively through pacific means.<sup>48</sup> Like the Nine-Power Treaty before it, its great weakness was the failure to include any provision for enforcement, lacking even any recommended steps in the event of failure to abide by its principles.

Still, despite the setback of Geneva, the desire to build upon the Washington Conference was not lost. The London Naval Conference of January-April 1930 sought to place new limits on vessels which had not been covered by the capital ship ratios in Washington. Japan sought a 10:7 ratio in heavy cruisers relative to American and British navies. However, unable to convince the Americans, Japan settled on a 10:6 ratio and greater ratios in smaller vessels, a compromise which angered the right-wing commanders of the Imperial Japanese Navy who refused to ratify the Treaty. When the liberal Japanese civilian government overruled the decision, a wave of violence was triggered across the country, climaxing with the assassination of Japan's Prime Minister, Osachi Hamaguchi.<sup>49</sup> This turn of events helped to precipitate a disastrous chain of events within the following year.

Japan was now quick-stepping down a slippery slope to conflict. The effects of the Great Depression had begun in Japan in 1926 when Chinese boycotts of Japanese goods collapsed trade between the two, injuring numerous Japanese banks. Forty per cent of Japan's exports went to America during the 1920s – when this also crashed, Japan was confronted with insufficient natural resources for expansion.<sup>50</sup> Disillusionment with the West grew in a populace which believed that the entire sequence of events could have been avoided. In turn, trying to bolster its domestic economy, America imposed high trade tariffs

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<sup>48</sup> *Kellogg-Briand Pact*, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/kbpact.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Nish, I. H., *Japanese Foreign Policy, 1869-1942: Kasumigaseki to Miyakezaka*, (London; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1977) pp 168-172

<sup>50</sup> Doerr, pp 112-113

on foreign goods while Britain increased its financial investment in China. Both moves cut into Japan's profits as it was unable to sell to the Americans or compete with the British in the Chinese market. The Japanese right, viewing its existing system of government as a barrier to Japan's economic recovery, advocated an increased military role. Support grew for territorial expansion as a means of insulating itself against a weak and threatening world economy.<sup>51</sup> Given the frayed relations between Japan and the West, unsurprisingly, right-wing Japanese elements increasingly embraced a form of Japanese manifest destiny as an alternative to cooperation with economic rivals. Japanese disillusionment soared with the conclusion of the London Naval Conference. The public berated Japanese negotiators for failing to obtain naval parity with the United States and Britain, while the assassination of the Prime Minister badly weakened the liberal civilian government.<sup>52</sup> Supported by a disgruntled populace, right-wing military nationalists determined that the time had come for a decisive move.

Japan's direct involvement in Chinese affairs increased suddenly and violently on September 18, 1931, when officers of the Kwangtung Army, a branch of the Imperial Japanese Army (I.J.A.) active on the continent since the end of the Russo-Japanese War, orchestrated the bombing of the Japanese-operated South Manchuria Railway. Blaming the attack on Chinese terrorists and announcing plans to deal with the emergency before it escalated, the army speedily seized major strategic points in South Manchuria. This was done so quickly and efficiently that Japan's civilian government, unaware of the plan in the first place, could not stop it.<sup>53</sup> Even if it had been better prepared to intervene, Tokyo would

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<sup>51</sup> Hall, John Whitney, *Japan From Prehistory to Modern Times*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970) p 325

<sup>52</sup> Doerr, p 120

<sup>53</sup> Fairbank, John K., Edwin O. Reischauer, Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: Tradition & Transformation*, Rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, c1989), pp 705-709

still have faced difficulties as the invasion, presented as a success story with Japan acting fairly to defend its interests, proved popular with the populace. The wave of nationalist sentiment forced the civilian government to accept the army's action, greatly undermining its own authority.<sup>54</sup>

World reaction to the hostile outbreak was characterized by obvious scepticism of the I.J.A. claim of defensive action. Unconvinced that the Chinese had carried out the bombings, many concluded that the I.J.A. had planned the event well in advance.<sup>55</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson expressed concern to the Japanese Ambassador that a confrontation over Manchuria was not of exclusive interest to Japan and China. Aggressive action by either party called into question the purpose of such agreements as the Nine-Power Treaty and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, making it clear that the world could not turn a blind eye.<sup>56</sup>

Naturally convinced of its innocence during the incident yet unable to halt the Japanese invasion on its own, China pleaded its case before the League of Nations, initiating an awkward challenge that the League could not overcome. The U.S., the nation most capable of acting militarily against Japan, was not a League member and thus not bound to participate in any issues brought before it. In opting to present its case to the League rather than the international community as a whole, China effectively distanced itself from the United States, its most consistent supporter. European League members, notably France and Italy, with little investment or military clout in the Far East, were too preoccupied with Germany to consider any serious military action to defend Chinese sovereignty. This left

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<sup>54</sup> Sims, Richard, *A Political History of Modern Japan, 1868-1952*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1991) pp 181-184

<sup>55</sup> Stimson, Henry Lewis, *The Far Eastern Crisis; Recollections and Observations* (New York: Harper, 1936) pp 34-36

<sup>56</sup> *Memorandum Handed by the Secretary of State to the Japanese Ambassador (Debuchi)* 22 September 1931, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/paw/002.html>

Great Britain as the only force which could conceivably dissuade Japan.<sup>57</sup> Unlike America, however, Britain was a traditionally imperial nation with little regard for China's nationalist sentiments. Indeed, many Britons saw Japan as a sort of kindred spirit, an island nation reliant on colonial holdings for security.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the British attitude towards China had been strained by Chinese boycotts of British goods since the early 1920s. The British did not think highly of the Chinese government, with one Foreign Office expert concluding that "there is virtually no Chinese Government in existence (the nominal Government at Nanking is without power and on the point of collapse)."<sup>59</sup> Deeply mired in its own economic crisis, Britain could hardly spare the resources to confront Japan, especially as its own commercial interests in Manchuria were limited. The League therefore took the passive route, adopting a resolution on September 30<sup>th</sup> that acknowledged but did not accept Japan's announcement that the I.J.A. had acted in self-defense. This turned out to be prudent as the credibility of the Japanese Cabinet was dealt a serious blow when it announced that the I.J.A. was returning to defensive positions, only to see the I.J.A. advance more deeply into Chinese territory. Faced with the shabby credibility of Japanese officials unwilling to force the I.J.A. to withdraw from China, the League proposed forming a commission of inquiry to independently investigate the crisis.<sup>60</sup>

Americans were sympathetic to China's plight but not to the point of abandoning their isolationist tendencies to fight a country as powerful as Japan. Stimson, certain that an independent commission would serve no real purpose other than to strengthen the I.J.A. position, declined to become involved in Commission details. Instead, he involved the

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<sup>57</sup> Doerr, Paul, pp 121-122

<sup>58</sup> Louis, William R., *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) p 175

<sup>59</sup> *Memorandum by Orde*, 15 January 1932, *DBFP*, Ser 2, Vol. 9, pp 127-129

<sup>60</sup> Louis, pp 177-178

United States under the auspices of the Nine-Power and Kellogg-Briand Treaties.<sup>61</sup> Given that neither pact had any enforcement provisions, Stimson effectively had adopted a policy of neutrality. While Washington was confident that continued I.J.A. aggression would turn American public opinion against Japan, it nevertheless sidestepped any genuine responsibility by hiding behind treaties that required no specific action.<sup>62</sup>

With the burden of responsibility placed squarely on the League's shoulders, Britain attempted to deal with the situation while satisfying its own political needs. Highlighting an appreciation of Japan's tenuous position as an island empire, its attitude was that while Japanese inroads into Manchuria should be discouraged, Britain's "interest in the territorial status of Manchuria [was] infinitely less than [its] interest in maintaining cordial relations with Japan."<sup>63</sup> Although this allowed it to avoid any immediate resolution, Britain was nevertheless perturbed. In a December review, the British Military Attaché in Tokyo reported that the I.J.A. had "employed force far beyond the minimum force necessary to achieve the immediate object."<sup>64</sup> While willing to tolerate Japanese inroads in Manchuria, Britain would not accept Japanese interference in regions of greater importance to Britain.

Powerless to check Japanese aggression independently, Britain understood that the United States would be its most viable ally in any confrontation. To promote cooperation, Britain encouraged American observers to participate in the League's discourse on the Manchurian affair.<sup>65</sup> Loathe to allow any appearance of American involvement in League affairs, however, Stimson still pursued a policy of biased neutrality and moral stance but

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<sup>61</sup> *Trans-Atlantic Telephone Conversation between Henry L. Stimson, Norman H. Davis and Hugh R. Wilson*, September 23 1931 *FRUS* 1931, Vol. 3, pp 43-47

<sup>62</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Castle) of a conversation with the Japanese Ambassador (Debuchi)*, 12 October 1931, *FRUS* 1931, Vol. 3, pp 165-167

<sup>63</sup> *Memorandum by Sir V. Wellesley*, 22 December 1931, *DBFP*, Ser 2, Vol. 9, pp 31-33

<sup>64</sup> *Sir F. Lindley (Tokyo) to Sir J. Simon*, 12 December 1931, *DBFP* Ser. 2, Vol. 9, pp 1-12

<sup>65</sup> *Memorandum by Sir V. Wellesley*, 1 February 1932, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 9, pp 283-291

little more. As Stimson wrote, “We do not see how we can do anything more ourselves as a government than to announce our disapproval and to announce that we will not recognize any treaties which may be forced by Japan under the pressure of military occupation.”<sup>66</sup>

This famous comment eventually formed the basis of Stimson’s Non-Recognition Doctrine which was subsequently presented via letter to both China and Japan. The United States declared its refusal to acknowledge any agreement “which may impair the treaty rights of the United States or its citizens in China, including those that relate to the sovereignty, the independence, or the territorial and administrative integrity of the Republic of China, or to the international policy relative to China.”<sup>67</sup> Japan was unimpressed, and the situation escalated seriously in mid-January 1932 when Japan invaded Shanghai.

For the Western Powers, Japan’s attack on Shanghai drastically altered the nature of Far East affairs. While Manchuria held little intrinsic value to either America or Britain, they had extensive interests in Shanghai. On February 23, 1932, an indignant Stimson wrote another famous letter, this time to Senator W.E. Borah, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Stimson called upon the signatories of the Nine-Power Treaty and Kellogg-Briand Pact to recognize their obligations to the Open Door for “a situation has developed which cannot, under any circumstances, be reconciled with the obligations of the covenants of these two treaties, and that if the treaties had been faithfully observed, such a situation could not have arisen.”<sup>68</sup> Ironically, the letter highlighted America’s failure to act meaningfully against Japan as Stimson had failed to do anything more than express his

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<sup>66</sup> *Memo of the Trans-Atlantic telephone conversation between Henry L. Stimson and Charles Dawes, November 20, 1931 FRUS 1931, Vol. 3, 495-497*

<sup>67</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Consul General at Nanking (Peck), 7 January 1932, FRUS 1932, Vol. 3, pp 7-8*

<sup>68</sup> *Letter to Senator Borah, Committee on Foreign Relations by Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of State, 23 February 1932, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=652>*

disapproval. However, it indirectly served the further aim of inviting Britain to merge its own policy with that of the U.S., presenting Japan with a unified Anglo-American front.

British officials had drawn “the gloomiest inferences” from Japan’s invasion of Shanghai:

If Japan continues unchecked the British will have to retire altogether from the Far East. If it is decided that we must check Japan certain preliminary measures could be adopted – such as rupture of diplomatic and economic relations – but in the end Japan can only be checked by force. Ultimately we will be faced with the alternatives of going to war with Japan or retiring from the Far East. A retirement from the Far East might well be the prelude to a retirement from India.<sup>69</sup>

There had also been a shift in Britain’s appreciation of the Chinese. While impressed by China’s stalwart resistance against Japan,<sup>70</sup> Britain’s weak economy made it unwilling to jeopardize its stake in China’s market. Stimson’s invitation was therefore far more welcoming than it would have been a few months earlier,<sup>71</sup> although British officials were concerned that Stimson was quite capable of “backing out after we had agreed to give our support, leaving us to clear up the resultant mess.”<sup>72</sup> This underscored the cool nature of the Anglo-American relationship; despite Japan’s growing antagonism there remained a good deal of political distrust between the English-speaking powers. Nevertheless, seeking to present Japan with a firm demonstration of Anglo-American solidarity, Britain pushed the League to match the Stimson Doctrine. On March 11, the Special Assembly of the League, proclaiming its opposition to any settlement made in China by means of military force, adopted a policy of non-recognition.<sup>73</sup> The move produced mixed results. Though a public show of cooperation between the U.S. and Britain, the Western powers ultimately did too

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<sup>69</sup> Nish, Ian, “Japan in Britain’s View, 1919-1937,” in Ian Nish ed., *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952: Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p 38.

<sup>70</sup> *Memorandum by Sir J. Pratt*, 21 February 1932, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 9, pp 565-569

<sup>71</sup> Nish, “Japan in Britain’s View, 1919-1937,” pp 38 - 39

<sup>72</sup> *Memorandum by Sir V. Wellesley*, 1 February 1932, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 9, pp 283-291

<sup>73</sup> Nish, “Japan in Britain’s View, 1919-1937,” p 40

little too late. Hostilities temporarily ceased, but Japan had cemented control over Manchuria. Faced with Japan's farcical proclamation of the "independent" state of Manchukuo, nothing short of war could have altered the course of events. China again won moral support but fell flat in actually protecting its territory.

As the first real challenge to peace in the years following World War I, the Manchurian Incident highlighted a number of aspects of the international framework of the time. It demonstrated that even major multilateral treaties, if they lacked proper enforcement provisions, did little to dissuade an aggressive single power from acting in its own interests. It exposed the League of Nations as unable to offer its members the infallible collective security they craved. It proved that neither the United States nor Great Britain was willing to tangle with Japan if there was no tangible threat to its own interests and that it was difficult to stop Japan from doing whatever it wanted in the Far East. Finally, while it showed that the U.S. and Great Britain could cooperate when necessary, there was no assurance that they would always do so.



## CHAPTER II

### THE ROOSEVELT PRESIDENCY

Any change in the United States presidency is guaranteed to arouse international curiosity, and the world was attentive when President Herbert Hoover lost the election in 1932 to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt, Wilson's former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, became the head of the first Democratic administration since Woodrow Wilson had failed to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations. Destined to spend most of his first term searching for a solution to the Great Depression, his approach did not abandon international involvement. While President-Elect, Roosevelt had expressed support for Stimson's policies in Manchuria.<sup>74</sup> He believed that "American foreign policies must uphold the sanctity of international treaties," falling in line with Stimson's doctrine established the year before.<sup>75</sup>

On February 21, Roosevelt appointed Senator Cordell Hull as Secretary of State. A Tennessee Congressman and Senator for twenty-three years, the sixty-two-year-old Hull was "gentle" and "frail," spoke with a slight lisp and gave "the appearance of a benign southern gentleman of the old school."<sup>76</sup> Hull believed that economic and military disarmament were the "two most vital and outstanding factors for peace and business recovery," and shortly before his appointment, had outlined a program in which he proposed reductions in tariffs and "trade obstructions," as well as the breakdown of trade barriers through reciprocal agreements.<sup>77</sup> As a man with an established reputation for supporting economic internationalism, Hull's appointment evidenced Roosevelt's desire to encourage an

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<sup>74</sup> *Memorandum by the Secretary of State of a Telephone Conversation With the Governor of New York (Roosevelt)*, January 13, 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, p 53

<sup>75</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in China (Johnston)*, January 18, 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, p 102

<sup>76</sup> Dallek, p 33

<sup>77</sup> Hull, Cordell, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948) p 155

economic upturn through international cooperation. Furthermore, Hull's appointment brought considerable prestige to Roosevelt's new administration as Hull was an influential force on Capital Hill. Like his predecessor, Hull, aware of his own value as a statesman and not content with paper pushing, demanded a vital role in the administration's foreign policy-making process.<sup>78</sup>

Despite his appointment, Hull was not a man with whom the President had an imperturbable relationship. "Suspicious by nature," Hull "brooded over what he thought were slights and grievances, which more forthright handling might have set straight. His brooding led, in accordance with Tennessee-mountain tradition, to longstanding feuds. His hatreds were implacable – not hot hatreds, but long cold ones."<sup>79</sup> Moreover, though he endeavoured to keep his condition secret, Hull suffered from tuberculosis and diabetes, the effects of which forced him on several occasions after 1937 to temporarily cede control of the State Department. The lisp that so prominently defined him as a southern gentleman, when combined with an almost inaudible public speaking voice, limited Hull's ability to engage with the public. He was also a wordy man whose often negative assessment of world events drove Roosevelt to distraction. A British diplomat described Hull as "a man of the utmost integrity, dignity and charm. He behaves with great courtesy to the heads of missions, and replies at great length to any question they may put to him' but when they return to their houses they usually have difficulty remembering anything he said that deserves to be repeated."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Hull, p 158

<sup>79</sup> Acheson, Dean, *Present at Creation: My Years in the State Department*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), pp 9-11

<sup>80</sup> O'Sullivan, Christopher D. *Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning and the Quest for a New World Order, 1937-1943* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) p 7

Given's Hull's shortcomings, Roosevelt needed someone in the State Department upon whom he could rely. That man was Sumner Welles, a long-time friend of the Roosevelt family. Welles was initially appointed to the post of Assistant Secretary for Latin America, making him one of Hull's senior advisors. But over time, the State Department became a "house divided against itself," with factions following either Hull or Welles. Upon Welles' promotion to Undersecretary of State in the spring of 1937, the division became more evident. Hull's declining health forced him to turn the Department over to Welles for long periods of time, and Roosevelt relied more and more upon Welles to carry out the nation's foreign affairs.<sup>81</sup> The disparity between the world views of the Secretary and Undersecretary of State would have a significant effect on America's foreign policy during the pre-war period.

After Roosevelt's declaration of support for the Stimson Doctrine, some American officials warned in 1933 that touting international treaties alone would not restore lasting peace to the Far East. Chief of Far Eastern Affairs Stanley Hornbeck contended that "at this stage, nothing short of a threat by the world (or some two or three major powers) of intervention by the use of some form of force would offer any likely chance of preventing a substantial increase in the near future of the hostilities ... between Japan and China." Perhaps with the same thought in mind, Britain imposed an arms embargo upon China and Japan on February 27. While initially wanting to restrict Japan alone, there was concern that the move would incite open war as the Japanese navy moved to blockade Chinese ports.<sup>82</sup> As the U.S. Congress had already nixed a recommendation by Hoover to impose an American embargo, Roosevelt had no interest in replicating such a futile effort: this meant

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<sup>81</sup> O'Sullivan, pp 7, 18-20

<sup>82</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 6 March 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, p 225

that Britain's move went unsupported.<sup>83</sup> Unable to effect serious change alone, Britain informed the U.S. on March 7 that it would lift its embargo.<sup>84</sup>

This setback was neither the last nor the most serious encountered by the international community in its efforts to contain Japanese aggression. On February 24, a special Assembly of the League of Nations adopted a report from an international military tribunal for the Far East which condemned Japan as the aggressor, defined Manchuria as an important region of China, and called for the war to end.<sup>85</sup> Made over the objections of the Japanese delegation, the decision could not have produced more disastrous results. Rather than accepting the responsibility placed upon it, Japan walked out of the Assembly and promptly resigned from the League altogether.<sup>86</sup> China then appealed to the United States to align itself more closely with the League as Japan was making a "deliberate attempt to impair the post-war machinery for the preservation of peace".<sup>87</sup> American officials, however, felt that mediation relied mostly upon the capacity of China and Japan to engage in peace talks of their own. Despite this, they had little faith in China's diplomatic ability. As Hornbeck complained, China's leaders provided no evidence of unity or solidarity among themselves and it remained difficult to assist a nation which spoke through a "multiplicity of mouths."<sup>88</sup> U.S. Minister to China Nelson T. Johnson stated outright that China "should not expect the United States to go beyond what it had already said or done," as the U.S. did not want to become "more physically involved" in the situation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *The Department of State to the British Embassy*, 11 March 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol.3, pp 231-232

<sup>84</sup> *The British Embassy to the Department of State*, 7 March 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 225-226

<sup>85</sup> International Military Tribunal for the Far East, *Chapter V, Japanese Aggression against China*, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/PTO/IMTFE/IMTFE-5.html>

<sup>86</sup> *The Consul at Geneva (Gilbert) to the Secretary of State*, 24 February 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 206-207

<sup>87</sup> *The Chinese Legation to the Department of State*, 28 March 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 258-260

<sup>88</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 26 April 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 293-294

<sup>89</sup> *The Minister in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, May 12, 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 318-319

Japan's withdrawal from the League again illustrated the critical problem in the international arrangement following World War I – the inability to enforce international agreements. While the Nine-Power Treaty and Kellogg-Briand Pact lacked essential enforcement measures, the League of Nations as an entity lacked the capacity to ensure member participation in collective security. Faced with Japan's refusal to withdraw from Manchuria, the League was bound by its Covenant to place economic sanctions on Japan or to use force. It did neither, as the threat of economic sanctions was useless without American cooperation and military reprisal was unlikely against a nation of Japan's strength. Ultimately, the League was unable to mediate in Manchuria, unable to maintain the integrity of the Open Door, and weakened by the departure of one its most powerful, if uncooperative, members.

Faced with a hopeless situation, China sued for peace, agreeing to completely withdraw from contested zones while Japan agreed to fall back to areas north of the Great Wall. This was hardly an equal arrangement as Japanese troops had the right to periodically travel beyond their official zone of authority to ensure that their Chinese counterparts were making no effort to push beyond their own territory.<sup>90</sup> With this Tangku Truce, China effectively gave up any efforts to regain control of Manchuria.

With this settled, the United States sought to discourage Japan from further expansion. Since it was clear that China could not counterbalance Japan, the U.S. needed an alternative. It found it in the Soviet Union. Relations between Japan and Russia, never particularly amicable, had become increasingly strained over a variety of irritants, including notably the Chinese Eastern Railroad running through Manchukuo. Japan's military had

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<sup>90</sup> *The Consul General at Tientsin (Lockhart) to the Secretary of State*, May 31, 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 249-350

territorial ambitions in resource-rich Eastern Siberia and Mongolia, and ill-defined borders in Manchuria made volatile skirmishes there more likely. Furthermore, Japan possessed a particularly strong aversion to Communism, the defining characteristic of the Soviet Union. As U.S. Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew noted, Japan could be provoked into war in the interest of destroying a hated Soviet regime. While the similar strength of both nations' armies in the region led America to consider a Japan-U.S.S.R. conflict unlikely in 1933, it believed it closer by 1935 as Japan's military presence on the mainland steadily increased.<sup>91</sup> For the United States, the U.S.S.R. was an appropriate ally as it was unlikely to ever align with Japan. Moreover, unlike China, it was capable of resisting Japanese advances without extensive foreign support. Roosevelt and Hull knew that an alliance with the Soviets would give pause to Japan which could not easily overcome a Soviet Union backed by the West.<sup>92</sup>

The decision to align with the Soviet Union was not made lightly. The U.S. had avoided recognition of the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. However, after the Japanese Foreign Office asserted that improved Russian-American relations would further weaken the liberal civilian government in Japan and thus increase the chance of militants driving Japan into war, Hull commented in his memoirs that:

Japanese diplomats always took care to represent to us that there were two elements in Japan: one, liberal, peaceful, and civilian; the other, military and expansionist. There was always a neat balance between them, they argued, which our actions could affect. If we did not irritate the military element by denying them the right to expand in the Far East, the peaceful element could eventually gain control of the Government and ensure peace. It was therefore up to us to prevent the worse from happening in Japan.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Under-Secretary of State (Phillips)*, October 6, 1933, and *The Assistant Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hamilton) to the Chief of the Division (Hornbeck)*, October 6, 1933, *FRUS* 1933, Vol. 3, pp 421-427

<sup>92</sup> Kennedy, pp 92-95

<sup>93</sup> Hull, p 276

The onus was put on the U.S. to decide if formal relations with Russia would prevent war or, by shifting the domestic balance of power in Japan towards the militant right, encourage war. On one side, conservative opposition from groups such as American Catholics suggested that the U.S.S.R. took an unacceptable stance on religious freedoms. On the other side, liberal American businessmen hoped to find a new market for goods manufactured in the United States. There were also those who hoped that Soviet-American rapprochement would inhibit Japan's aggression. On November 17, 1933, after nine days of negotiations over a range of issues, the United States officially recognized the U.S.S.R. and reopened trade to generally favourable domestic reaction.<sup>94</sup> The suddenly improved relations between the two countries shifted the Far East balance of power against Japan, forcing it to reassess its ambitions in northeast Asia.

In April 1934, Eiji Amau, spokesman for the Japanese Foreign Office, announced that Japan would assume full responsibility for peace in the Far East. In this notorious Amau statement, Japan made it clear that it would not tolerate foreign assistance to China, claiming that order would only occur through the "voluntary efforts of China herself."<sup>95</sup> Functionally the equivalent of America's Monroe Doctrine, Amau's claim was in juxtaposition to the Nine-Power Treaty which held that the development of a strong China was essential to both the Chinese people themselves and the international community. Though the statement was made unofficially, the American Embassy felt it was reflective of a fixed policy in Japan and that Amau had made the statement informally so that it could be denied should world opinion prove too inhospitable.<sup>96</sup> China quickly argued that loans and technical assistance to China had been "strictly limited to matters of a non-political character." Moreover, no nation

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<sup>94</sup> Dallek, pp 78-80

<sup>95</sup> Dallek, p 77

<sup>96</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, April 20, 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 3, pp 117-121

“which does not harbour any ulterior motives against China” had anything to fear from a policy of reconstruction and security.<sup>97</sup>

Although the Amau statement could have been interpreted as a precursor to a further Japanese push into China, Grew believed instead that it was meant solely to buttress Japan’s position at the upcoming London Naval Conference; as such, it was not reflective of Japan’s desire to reduce China to a protectorate state.<sup>98</sup> FDR’s administration sent only a token, non-provocative reminder of Japanese obligations under the Nine-Power Treaty.<sup>99</sup> Britain’s reaction was equally lukewarm, sending, “in a most friendly spirit,” its own aide-mémoire to Japan.<sup>100</sup> Avoiding any mention of the League of Nations, Britain asked the United States to exchange views on the issue, although there was some concern in the British Cabinet that Anglo-American unity could cause unnecessary umbrage to Japan.<sup>101</sup> With neither nation keen on taking the initiative, little came of the Japanese statement beyond a ruffling of feathers.

Putting this issue firmly behind them, Britain and the U.S. prepared for the London Naval Conference, scheduled for late 1935. In a decade which had seen every major negotiation encouraging disarmament and peaceful interchange fall flat, policymakers felt a tremendous amount of pressure to achieve two particular objectives. First, they hoped to avoid the cessation of the Five-Power Treaty which would conclude in 1936 if it was repudiated by any of its signatories. Second, they wanted to expand upon the first London Naval Treaty of 1930, itself an extension of the Five-Power Treaty, and also slated to

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<sup>97</sup> *The Chinese Foreign Office to the Chinese Legation in Washington*, April 19, 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 3, pp 114-115

<sup>98</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, April 20, 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 3, pp 115-116

<sup>99</sup> Dallek, p 77

<sup>100</sup> Trotter, Ann, *Britain and East Asia 1933-1937* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp 73-81

<sup>101</sup> *The Ambassador in Great Britain (Bingham) to the Secretary of State*, April 21, 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 3, pp 122-123



conclude in 1936. The looming problem with both objectives was that the ratio system governing both treaties was despised by Japan. Since its inception at the Washington Conference of 1921, the 5:5:3 ratio on capital ships, disliked initially by the militant right, had become a symbol of western oppression for many Japanese. In 1930, the London Naval Treaty had imposed limits by ratio on smaller ships, and although receiving Japanese approval, did little to assuage those who resented the ratio governing the more prestigious capital ships. By 1934 it seemed certain that Japan would demand absolute parity in tonnage with Britain and the U.S. or abandon the system altogether.<sup>102</sup>

From the time of the Washington Conference, the United States had promoted naval limitation among the powers. In addition, the U.S. itself had not made a move to actually reach any of the limits imposed, following a policy of “disarmament by example.” President Hoover, with a particular aversion to rearmament, had not authorized a single new ship during his presidency. By the time Roosevelt took office, the U.S. Navy lagged far behind the Japanese and British fleets in terms of actual tonnage and ship numbers. Roosevelt had good reason to continue advocating disarmament. The expense required to maintain a powerful navy imposed a major burden on the economy at the best of times, let alone during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A powerful group in Congress had long opposed naval expansion and it was generally assumed that the American people would support any form of arms limitation given their ignorance of the problems posed by a weak navy.<sup>103</sup> However, Roosevelt was, as Jonathan Utley described him, “a Navy man who loved and understood the Navy.”<sup>104</sup> Although he approved of arms limitation, he opposed any policy that would

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<sup>102</sup> Dallek, p 87

<sup>103</sup> Borg, pp 100- 102

<sup>104</sup> Utley, Jonathan, *Franklin Roosevelt and Naval Strategy, 1933-1941* in Edward J. Marolda ed. *FDR and the U.S. Navy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) p 49

put the U.S. navy at an international disadvantage. FDR opted to pursue naval expansion, remaining a fervent champion of disarmament but pushing for an increase in the navy's budget.

Selecting a firm naval partisan, Senator Claude Swanson, to head the Navy Department, FDR set about increasing the American fleet to the 1930 treaty limits. His most important initiative was persuading Congress to accept the notion that naval construction was actually a form of public works. Federal spending breathed life into the Navy's rearmament program, allowing it to tackle the backlog of maintenance that had built up during Hoover's presidency. The program was funded by revenue from the Public Works Administration, a major agency of Roosevelt's program for domestic relief, the New Deal. In 1933, naval expansion, using National Industrial Recovery Act funds, included two new aircraft carriers, four cruisers, four submarines, twenty-one destroyers and a number of auxiliary vessels.<sup>105</sup> In January 1934, Congress authorized the construction of more than one hundred new ships at an estimated cost of \$76 million. When American critics contended that Roosevelt was abandoning disarmament, he argued that while Japan had expanded its navy to full treaty limits and Britain had partially expanded, the U.S. had not kept pace. When questioned by critics in Britain's Foreign Office, however, Roosevelt responded that the program was geared towards job creation and domestic relief.<sup>106</sup> Both statements were true, for Roosevelt had discovered the means by which to stimulate economic growth while reinforcing national security.

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<sup>105</sup> Hone, Thomas C., *The Evolution of the U.S. Fleet, 1933-1941: How the President Mattered*, in Edward J. Marolda ed. *FDR and the U.S. Navy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) p 77

<sup>106</sup> Doenecke, Justus D. *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies: 1933-1945* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005) pp 30-31

By selling naval expansion as adhering to treaty limits, Roosevelt put much stock in maintaining the existing treaty system. Though he promoted his program as defensive, militarists in Japan reacted by securing funds for their own program of expansion.<sup>107</sup> If the U.S. acceded to Japanese demands to eliminate the system, it would surely spark a new arms race. If the U.S. gave in to British demands to reduce the size of battleships and heavy cruisers while allowing more light cruisers, the American navy would find itself ill suited to conduct Pacific operations. In either case, the collapse of the existing system would deprive Roosevelt of his justification for naval expansion. And since it appeared that Japan would almost certainly reject the existing system, Roosevelt needed to shift responsibility for the anticipated collapse to Japan, proposing to Britain that both countries maintain limits on Anglo-American tonnage regardless of Japan's adherence to the system.<sup>108</sup> These limits could then be raised or lowered depending on Japan's conduct. Roosevelt hoped to appease Britain's desire for changes while portraying any ultimate failure as being Japan's fault.<sup>109</sup>

Relations between Britain and the U.S. had become tense by 1934, predominantly as a result of the failure in Manchuria and the collapse of the 1933 World Economic Conference. Seeking to fight global depression and revitalize trade through stabilization of exchange rates, the Conference had devolved into a frustrating failure when Roosevelt dropped the bombshell of denouncing the British-backed concept of currency stabilization.<sup>110</sup> The two nations remained unified, however, in their concern that Japan would demand naval parity. At Britain's urging, they agreed to hold informal talks in

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<sup>107</sup> Doenecke, pp 30-31

<sup>108</sup> *Sir J. Simon to Sir R. Clive (Tokyo) and Mr. Osborne (Washington)*, 8 August 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, pp 13 - 14

<sup>109</sup> Dallek, p 87

<sup>110</sup> Dallek provides a detailed analysis of the World Economic Conference in *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, pp 35-58

advance of the conference to iron out their differences and to confront Japan together.<sup>111</sup>

Roosevelt dispatched Norman H. Davis as his representative to London. A prominent internationalist, Davis had served as Wilson's Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and had been an advisor to Roosevelt even before the latter assumed the presidency.<sup>112</sup> As soon as Davis arrived in London, British officials indicated that a critical hurdle to overcome was Britain's desire to increase cruiser limits.<sup>113</sup> Maintaining that the situation now was wholly different from 1930, Britain believed it would need the ships unless an agreement could be worked out with the U.S. regarding policy cooperation in the Far East, which Britain considered unlikely. At the time of the cruiser limit agreement in 1930, Britain had felt that it faced only the singular threat of Japan. By 1935, however, while the United States still remained concerned only with Japan, Britain faced additional threats in Europe.<sup>114</sup> However, Roosevelt steadfastly refused any tonnage increase from either Britain or Japan, stating that "if the basic principle of continued naval limitation with progressive reduction can be adhered to this year and next, the technicalities ... can be solved by friendly conference."<sup>115</sup> Davis confirmed that as any formal Anglo-American alliance in the Far East was out of the question, the only remaining course was to jointly maintain "so far as possible a full measure of Anglo-American agreement." While respecting Britain's tenuous position, he concluded the discussions to be at an impasse.<sup>116</sup> Washington's concern was not with the size of the British Navy. Instead it feared that a British increase in naval tonnage might further tarnish

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<sup>111</sup> Borg, pp 103 - 104

<sup>112</sup> Dallek, p 26

<sup>113</sup> *The Ambassador in Great Britain (Bingham) to the Secretary of State*, 21 June 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 1, pp 266-267

<sup>114</sup> Borg, pp 103-105

<sup>115</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain (Bingham)* 30 November 1935, *FRUS* Japan:1931-1941, Vol. 1, pp 282-283

<sup>116</sup> *The Ambassador in Great Britain (Bingham) to the Secretary of State*, 27 June 1934, *FRUS* 1934, Vol. 1, pp 279-280

its image in the eyes of the isolationist American public. As a frustrated Sir Robert Vansittart, Britain's Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, remarked, "As to America there is no question of closer relations. These may become possible when America realises that she must have a policy. Hitherto she has thought it possible to dispense with the inconvenience...."<sup>117</sup>

With hopes of a rapprochement with the United States dashed, Britain engaged in talks with Japan. While renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was considered a step too far, there was a strong desire to reform at least some aspect of past Anglo-Japanese cooperation which had been so fruitful. Such hopes were encouraged by goodwill between British Foreign Secretary John Simon and Japanese Foreign Minister Koki Hirota, a man well liked by Western diplomats.<sup>118</sup> The push for reconciliation with Japan revived an earlier idea of Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, who felt that while European issues should remain Britain's priority, pressure in the Far East should be reduced.<sup>119</sup> He suggested that an understanding with Japan might improve commercial relations and that detachment from the United States on the naval ratio issue might even serve as a lure. On July 3, 1934, Hirota took officials by surprise by indicating for the first time that Japan would be ready to conclude a non-aggression pact with Britain.<sup>120</sup> Encouraged by positive signals from Hirota and other Japanese officials, Chamberlain drafted a note encouraging Simon to explore in detail the possibility of an Anglo-Japanese non-aggression pact.<sup>121</sup> Simon confirmed that Japan was interested. However, it became quickly evident that Japan

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<sup>117</sup> *Sir J. Simon to Sir R. Clive (Tokyo) and Mr. Osborne (Washington)*, 8 August 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, See Note # 5, p 13

<sup>118</sup> Trotter, Ann, "Tentative Steps For An Anglo-Japanese Rapprochement in 1934," in *Modern Asian Studies*, Jan. 1974, Vol. 8, Issue 1, pp 66-71

<sup>119</sup> Feiling, K. *The Life of Neville Chamberlain*, (London: Macmillian and Co., 1946) p 252

<sup>120</sup> *Sir J. Simon to Sir R. Vansittart*, 20 August 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, p 15, See Note #1

<sup>121</sup> *Letter from Mr. N. Chamberlain to Sir J. Simon*, 1 September 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, pp 24-31

and Britain could not reconcile their differences enough to come to a fruitful agreement. A number of problems were detailed by a worried Charles Orde, head of the Foreign Office's Far Eastern Department, shortly after he received Chamberlain's note supporting the idea. While it was possible to reach an understanding on naval ratios, Britain was unable to garner assurances regarding its assets in China, was concerned that any non-aggression pact would increase the likelihood of a war between Japan and Russia, and remained keenly aware that any pact would be frowned upon in Washington.<sup>122</sup> By mid-November, discussions were deadlocked.<sup>123</sup> Despite Britain's willingness to explore relations with Japan, there remained too many obstacles in the way.

The last round of pre-conference negotiations opened in London in October 1934, with the British, Americans and Japanese participating. The discussions occurred bilaterally, with representatives from only two nations meeting at any one time. This did not sit well with Washington as it gave the impression that Britain was acting as the middleman between America and Japan, with the U.S. always appearing at odds.<sup>124</sup> This was not an entirely unfair observation for America's representatives had declared at the outset of meetings with Britain that they would brook absolutely no change to the Japan-U.S. naval ratios.<sup>125</sup> At the first meeting between Japan and the U.S., the Japanese stated that they would not negotiate a new treaty unless they gained parity with Western navies since the previous naval deal was domestically unpopular and damaged Japanese prestige in Asia.<sup>126</sup> Willing to risk a Japanese

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<sup>122</sup> *Memorandum by Mr. Orde on Mr. N. Chamberlain's proposals*, 4 September 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, pp 31-34

<sup>123</sup> Trotter, *Britain and East Asia*, pp 97-107

<sup>124</sup> Borg, p 106

<sup>125</sup> *Memorandum recording the results up to date of preliminary conversations relating to preparations for the 1935 Naval Conference held with the United States, Japanese, French and Italian representatives*, 3 October 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, pp 44-45

<sup>126</sup> *The Chairman of the Delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 24 October 1934, *FRUS Japan: 1931-1941*, Vol. 1, pp 254-256

walkout, the U.S. remained uninterested in a compromise; instead it wanted assurances that Japan would take full responsibility for its withdrawal from the treaty.<sup>127</sup>

Early in November a leak revealed that Britain and Japan had engaged in talks on naval issues.<sup>128</sup> On November 9, Roosevelt ordered Davis to impress upon Britain's representatives the "simple fact that if Great Britain is even suspected of preferring to play with Japan to playing with us, I shall be compelled, in the interest of American security, to approach public sentiment in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in a definite way to make these dominions understand clearly that their future security is linked with us in the United States." Adding that Davis would "best know how to inject this thought into the minds" of the British officials, Roosevelt left Davis to relay the message in as firm a manner as necessary.<sup>129</sup> Davis intimated to the British that "Anglo-American cooperation is of more vital importance to the British Empire than to us and that in case of trouble with Japan, Canada as a practical matter would in fact become our hostage."<sup>130</sup>

The difficulty in measuring the success of this threat to detach the dominions from Britain is that it is hard to determine with certainty what prompted the threat in the first place. In the immediate context, it could be interpreted as a move designed to pressure Britain and to prevent a resurgence of Anglo-Japanese cooperation. However, although Davis believed that the Conservatives in Britain favoured a settlement with Japan, he felt that British public opinion opposed a deal which would see naval parity, and the Dominions would oppose any

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<sup>127</sup> *The Acting Secretary of State to the Chairman of the Delegation*, 25 October 1934, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-1941, Vol. 1, pp 256- 257

<sup>128</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Sir J. Simon*, 8 November 1934, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 13, p 83

<sup>129</sup> *Roosevelt to Norman H. Davis*, 9 November 1934, in Edgar B. Nixon, ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs. Volume II: March 1934-August 1935* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) p 263

<sup>130</sup> *Davis to Roosevelt*, 27 November 1934, *Ibid*, p 291

threat to Anglo-American solidarity with or without American intervention.<sup>131</sup> Talks between Britain and Japan had produced few positive results and it seemed unlikely the two would come to any agreement which excluded the U.S. Judged in this context, the threat, while successful as Britain disavowed any naval deal with Japan, could have had a potentially negative effect on Anglo-American relations.

Another possible scenario is that Roosevelt had used the disarmament talks as an opportunity to pursue a long-term agenda. Believing the balance of world power to be shifting towards a continental system whereby Japan would reign in Asia and a conglomerate regime would rule in Europe, the President thought that North Americans would need to work out their own understanding, leaving an isolated Britain on the fringes of a new world order. In this context, Roosevelt's threat can also be interpreted as evidence of exploring the establishment of a "hemispheric defense system" which would rely on extensive cooperation between Canada and America.<sup>132</sup> The threat could be seen as a reminder to Britain that its future security might depend upon the strength of relations with its dominions. Regardless of the intent, the mere deliverance of Roosevelt's uncompromising message illustrated that the United States was suspicious of the strength of Anglo-American relations.

When the pre-conference talks ended in December 1934 with Japan's official denouncement of the Washington Treaty, officials in Washington were stunned. The State Department publicly restated its faith in limitation. It insisted that the existing treaty would continue in force until the end of 1936 and hoped that a new disarmament plan could be conceived. Furthermore, it argued that Japan bore the sole responsibility for the

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<sup>131</sup> Borg, pp 107-108

<sup>132</sup> Perras, Galen, *Franklin Roosevelt and the Origins of the Canadian-American Security Alliance*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998) p 11-12



disintegration of the limitation system.<sup>133</sup> While Hornbeck argued that America's significant military potential constituted a restraining influence upon Japan, the War Department's War Plans Division believed that war had become more probable. But as the U.S. was ill prepared to fight, it would be a prudent move for the U.S. to significantly fortify key American possessions in the Pacific. Despite an endorsement from Secretary of War George H. Dern, Congress failed to provide any funding for defensive improvements while the administration argued that any increase in military spending would only serve to provoke further international crises.<sup>134</sup>

The London Naval Conference convened on December 9, 1935. According to Hull, "few international meetings have convened in unhappier circumstances than the London Conference" as it took place shortly after Japan's rejection of the Washington Naval Treaty and parallel to both the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian War and an arms race in Europe.

Three days before the conference opened, Hull publicly concluded that:

It seems to this Government most important in this period of world-wide political unrest and economic instability that governments and peoples keep faith in principles and pledges. In international relations there must be agreements and respect for agreements in order that there may be the confidence and stability and sense of security which are essential to orderly life and progress ... This Government adheres to the provisions of the treaties to which it is a party and continues to bespeak respect by all nations for the provisions of treaties solemnly entered into.<sup>135</sup>

The conference was attended by delegations from Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy, all signatories of the Five-Power Treaty. Hull's initial instruction to Norman Davis, head of the American delegation, was to seek naval parity with Britain while opposing any Japanese attempt to do the same. As it seemed highly unlikely that Japan

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<sup>133</sup> Dallek, p 89

<sup>134</sup> Perras, *Stepping Stones to Nowhere*, p 29

<sup>135</sup> Hull, pp 444-446

could be coerced into an agreement, Hull informed Davis that while a new Five-Power Treaty was ideal, a pact which excluded Japan was acceptable. The catch, however, was that any such pact would need an “escape clause” that would permit America to build warships beyond treaty limits in the event of undue constructions by any non-contracting power, i.e., Japan. Hull warned against a strictly bilateral agreement with Britain as this would offend isolationist sentiment. Nevertheless, the Secretary felt that the United States and Great Britain were uniformly opposed to Japan’s aims, though Britain, with its European preoccupation, had failed to take as strong a stance.<sup>136</sup>

The conference unfolded as expected. The United States and Britain agreed, supported by France and Italy, to oppose Japanese demands for parity. Japan maintained that the advantage held by the United States was a source of apprehension in Japan, adding that it favoured a universal limit on tonnage and arms that was as low as possible. Britain and the U.S. were unswayed, however, and the conference adjourned for Christmas having made no significant progress. Upon reconvening, Hull told Roosevelt “... the Japanese have no intention of accepting any agreement in London ... and it seems perfectly clear to me that there is very little use in continuing the discussions.” Britain suggested a non-aggression pact which could maintain the Far East status quo, but the U.S. delegation pointed out that this would never be ratified by the Senate. Ultimately, Hull’s prediction proved accurate when the question of Japanese parity was put to a vote on January 15. After all powers except Japan voted against it, Japan promptly withdrew from the conference.<sup>137</sup> The conference then shifted its emphasis from the Far East to Eurocentric affairs. After dragging on until the end of March, America, Britain and France signed the Second London Naval

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<sup>136</sup> Hull, pp 447-448

<sup>137</sup> Hull, pp 449-450

Treaty although Italy did not. There was no further change to overall tonnage and only minor changes to the armaments permitted onboard each vessel. The treaty contained Hull's desired "escape clause," permitting the signatories to exceed the treaty's limits if any unaffiliated nation exceeded them in naval capacity.<sup>138</sup>

The London Naval Conference was an important event for negative reasons. Japan recognized that Western powers would not grant naval parity but retained its earlier declaration not to accept a lesser ratio. To call the conference an outright failure would be unfair as there had been little hope in either Britain or the U.S. that Japan would decide any differently. It could be more accurately called the formal proclamation of two years' worth of informal decision making. Britain had even suggested downgrading the event to a meeting between ambassadors rather than formal delegations. That Roosevelt had insisted on full fanfare was not reflective of his hope for success but rather his desire to keep up the appearance that his administration was serious about disarmament.<sup>139</sup> As such, the conference might even be considered a success as Japan took sole responsibility for the collapse of the naval system. This mattered little in Japan, however, where militants were finally free to make the Imperial Japanese Navy a force capable of dominating the Pacific. This outcome sounded the death knell for the status quo in the Far East and forced all interested parties to reassess their foreign policies.

The post-conference policies pursued by Japan, Britain and the United States were markedly different. The United States, where isolationism continued to build momentum, reassessed its involvement in an increasingly volatile world. Between September 1934 and February 1936, the Nye Committee, officially the Special Committee on Investigation of the

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<sup>138</sup> *Treaty for the Limitation of Naval Armament*  
[http://www.navweaps.com/index\\_tech/tech-089\\_London\\_Treaty\\_1936.htm](http://www.navweaps.com/index_tech/tech-089_London_Treaty_1936.htm)

<sup>139</sup> Dallek, p 90

Munitions Industry but more commonly named after its head, Senator Gerald Nye, concluded that America had been drawn into the First World War by the self-interested manoeuvring of bankers and munitions makers.<sup>140</sup> In 1935, fuelled by the committee's findings, Germany's repudiation of Versailles and its subsequent rearmament, and the likelihood of an Italian-Ethiopian war, isolationists demanded formal neutrality legislation that would treat all belligerent nations alike, thus preventing the U.S. from being dragged into unnecessary war.<sup>141</sup> These developments inevitably brought up the question of whether or not the U.S. should abandon its Open Door policy in the Far East. Writing in April 1935, Hornbeck reassessed the "realities" faced by the U.S. Stressing the difference between opposition by diplomacy and opposition by force, he pointed out that while the U.S. had never guaranteed that China's integrity would not be impaired, it remained under treaty obligation to refute this. While Japan's strong-armed actions might force acquiescence, it did not mean that America should give assent. To give up Open Door principles would necessitate that America do the same in all parts of the world. Hornbeck called for a less defeatist attitude in the Far East, greater adherence to existing principles with fewer empty words, new agreements, and affirmations of concepts already in place.<sup>142</sup>

On August 31, 1935, after months of often bitter debate, Roosevelt signed the Neutrality Act, slated to remain valid for six months. The act prohibited the U.S. from exporting or transporting arms or munitions to any belligerent nation, aggressor or victim, and forbade Americans from traveling on ships owned by belligerents. If a conflict broke

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<sup>140</sup> Hull, pp 398-100

<sup>141</sup> Cole, Wayne S., *Roosevelt and the Isolationists* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) pp 163-167

<sup>142</sup> Hornbeck, Stanley, *Why Not "Abandon the Open Door Policy"?*, 13 April 1935, R. Walton Moore Papers, Group 55, Box 8, File Hornbeck, S.K., Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York [FDRL]

out, the President was obliged to declare a state of war between the combatants.<sup>143</sup> For Hull, who had not wanted neutrality legislation, the Act was flawed because it allowed aggressive and well-armed nations like Germany, Italy, and Japan the opportunity to attack other states without fear that the U.S. would furnish their victims with arms.<sup>144</sup> This proved to be the case with the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian war in October 1935. Roosevelt promptly invoked the Act and declared both nations belligerents, a favourable situation for Italy which possessed its own capacity to manufacture and transport munitions, a capacity that Ethiopia lacked. The Act, however, did not prevent the sale of material goods necessary for war such as oil and steel, a point which sat well with neither isolationists nor internationalists. The former had no desire for any involvement with belligerent nations, and the latter did not want to undercut the League of Nations which had imposed economic sanctions on Italy.<sup>145</sup>

The 1935 Neutrality Act was a temporary measure which ended as the London Conference drew to a close. Realizing its flaws yet recognizing that the public was “indulging in isolationist hysteria” necessitating its continuation, FDR’s administration set about creating the Act’s next iteration.<sup>146</sup> When Roosevelt signed the second Neutrality Act on February 29, 1936, an amendment stipulated that the act would come into effect “whenever the President shall find that there exists a state of war,” a change which permitted some discrimination between aggressor and victim. Once again, the Act was designed as a temporary measure, in existence only until May 1, 1937. By then the 1936

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<sup>143</sup> *Neutrality Act of August 1935*, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/interwar/neutralityact.htm>

<sup>144</sup> Hull, p 406

<sup>145</sup> Cole, p 178-182

<sup>146</sup> Hull, p 460

election campaigns would be over and the President could design new legislation with greater freedom from public opinion.<sup>147</sup>

In Britain, the Far East was diminishing into a minor irritant when compared with the overwhelming threat growing in Europe. On March 7, 1936, German forces remilitarized the left bank of the Rhine, undermining the Locarno Pact and the last vestiges of the strategic advantage gained by the allies during the First World War.<sup>148</sup> Britain, its strength stretched between Europe and the Far East, was forced to adopt a policy of Realpolitik. It questioned whether accommodation could be reached with Japan which would allow Britain to safeguard its Far Eastern aims while still free to allocate its entire strength to Europe. Despite repeated disappointments in attempted conciliation with Japan, Britain did not immediately give up hope.<sup>149</sup> However, the Foreign Office's position in 1936 developed a cynical bent: any initiative to improve relations with Japan, while laudable, was doomed to failure without first addressing the problem of troubled Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>150</sup>

On January 17, 1936, British Secretary for War Alfred Duff circulated a memorandum, "The Importance of Anglo-Japanese Friendship," which pointed to Britain's poor relations with Japan, the importance of improving those relations, and the idea that this could be accomplished by being more 'friendly' towards Japan.<sup>151</sup> Since Britain retained a significant commercial investment in China, it needed to protect its stake there. While it

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<sup>147</sup> Cole, p 186

<sup>148</sup> The Locarno Pact had sought to normalize relations between Germany and the Western Allied Powers in the 1920s by ensuring that no conflict between Germany, France and Belgium would come to fruition. The German remilitarization of the Rhine negated the Locarno agreements and drastically increased tension between Germany, France and Belgium. See James Thomas Emmerson. *The Rhineland Crisis, 7 March 1936, A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy*, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977)

<sup>149</sup> Nish, Ian, "Shigeru," in Ian Nish ed. *Japanese Envoys in Britain, 1862-1964: A Century of Diplomatic Exchange* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2007)

<sup>150</sup> Best, Antony, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor: Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936-41* (London: Routledge, 1995) p 9

<sup>151</sup> *The Importance of Anglo-Japanese Friendship*, 17 January 1936, *DBFP Ser. 2, Vol. 20, No. 450*, pp 752-756

could opt to side with the Nanking regime, renounce its imperial privileges, and seek a mutually beneficial relationship with China, Britain also considered the possibility of a rekindled friendship with Japan in assisting with dividing China into spheres of influence.<sup>152</sup> This hope was encouraged through a number of channels. Japan had its own reasons for seeking good relations with a Western power for by 1936 it had become increasingly alarmed by pressure from the U.S.S.R. on northern China. The Japanese feared that if the Soviets should penetrate into Outer Mongolia, communist influence would seep further into China. Japan hoped that steady diplomatic pressure through a series of pacts and agreements would pressure China into resisting Soviet influences, thus serving as a buffer against Communist incursion.<sup>153</sup>

Throughout June 1936, the newly appointed Japanese Ambassador to Britain, Yoshida Shigeru, encouraged the belief that political moderates were gaining authority in Japan. It was made more plausible in the wake of a February 26 incident when an attempted coup d'état by young I.J.A. officers left several important politicians dead and triggered a Cabinet change, making it difficult for British officials to assess the political landscape.<sup>154</sup> According to Yoshida, the fundamental reason for difficulties between Japan and Britain lay in a mutual misunderstanding over China. Frederick Leith-Ross, Britain's Chief Economic Advisor, returned in July from a ten-month period in the Far East, stating that Britain could potentially improve its position in China through further financial investment, as neither Japanese civilian nor military authorities were prejudiced against British interests.<sup>155</sup> The

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<sup>152</sup> Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor*, pp 7-8

<sup>153</sup> Trotter, *Britain and East Asia 1933-1937*, pp 190-191

<sup>154</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the February 26 Incident, see Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Revolt in Japan: the Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1973)

<sup>155</sup> *The Leith-Ross Mission, DBFP, Ser. 2, Vol. 20, Appendix 1 pp 1003-1030*

report was well received by the Treasury and tied in closely with Yoshida's ideas.<sup>156</sup> In a ten-point plan, Yoshida proposed that Japan and Britain work together with China. He argued in favour of Anglo-Japanese discussions about financial and political aid to China, market and tariff controls there, and financial policy exchanges. He proposed that Japan support the Open Door and the sanctity of Chinese culture, and that China be brought directly into the discussion to check the spread of Communism. To sweeten the deal, he suggested that the naval conference be revived and that Japan should seek re-admittance into the League of Nations.<sup>157</sup>

Britain, however, had little to gain from these proposals. In exchange for gaining significant economic benefits, Yoshida was promising that Japan would fulfil already existing obligations while offering only vague hopes of reversing its stance on the League and disarmament.<sup>158</sup> An offer to include China was an empty proposition as it was unlikely that China would support anything that could potentially limit foreign aid or increase Japanese control over Chinese markets. Yoshida's plan seemed to dictate terms that were favourable to Britain and Japan without actually involving China in the decision making process. Unwilling to reject his initiative out of hand, however, British officials toned down some of the text's demands that might find disfavour in China. Yoshida rejected the revised document on the grounds that it went too far beyond the vague assurance of cooperation he had offered. This response prompted one British official to conclude that "Mr. Yoshida is just plainly no good."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor*, p 22

<sup>157</sup> Trotter, *Britain and East Asia 1933-1937*, pp 189-193

<sup>158</sup> Trotter, *Britain and East Asia 1933-1937*, pp 191-196

<sup>159</sup> Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor*, pp 23-24



As an understanding with Britain seemed unlikely, Japan had also explored alternative options. In January 1936, American Embassy officials in Berlin learned that talks between Japan and Germany in late 1935 had culminated in a military agreement.<sup>160</sup> Although both countries denied its existence, rumours circulated that each signatory had agreed to come to the other's aid in the event of any attack, a pact that could only be aimed at their mutual neighbour, the U.S.S.R.<sup>161</sup> Nobody was more anxious about this than the Soviets themselves. When Japanese troops strayed across the border between Manchukuo and Russia, Russia feared that Japan was trying to initiate a two-front war which might involve Germany plus other nations that supported the struggle against Communism.<sup>162</sup> The possibility of a spring or summer war between Japan and the U.S.S.R. seemed real by January's end, though dependent upon the situation in Europe.<sup>163</sup>

German and Japanese denials were rendered moot with the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact on November 25, 1936. Both nations pledged to unite against the Comintern and encouraged other states concerned by the threat of Communism to join them.<sup>164</sup> Germany's military preparedness, its geographical location, and particularly its ideological stance made it an ideal ally for challenging the Communist 'menace'. Yet many Japanese were displeased with the decision to ally with Germany, arguing that it weakened relations with both Britain and America at a time when they should be strengthened. The Japanese Foreign Office categorically denied that Japan was allying itself with the Fascist bloc or that it had conducted any military negotiations with Germany. Nevertheless, foreign

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<sup>160</sup> *The Ambassador in Germany (Dodd) to the Secretary of State*, 22 January 1936, *FRUS* 1936, Vol. 4, pp 19-20

<sup>161</sup> *Report by the Military Attaché in Germany (Smith)* 30 January 1936, *FRUS* 1936, Vol. 4, pp 31-32

<sup>162</sup> *The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State*, 31 January 1936, *FRUS* 1936, Vol. 4, p 33

<sup>163</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 4 February 1936, *FRUS* 1936, Vol. 4, pp 38-39

<sup>164</sup> *German-Japanese Agreement and Supplementary Protocol*, Signed at Berlin, 25 November 1936, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/tri1.asp>

diplomats felt that the pact was a cover for a secret military agreement since both the Japanese and German Military Attachés had been involved in its formation.<sup>165</sup> Predictably, the pact intensified animosity between Japan and the U.S.S.R., and, in Grew's opinion, convinced the Soviets that Japan understood only the language of force. Stressing that positive relations between Japan and Soviet Russia were an anachronism at the time, Grew believed that the Anti-Comintern Pact shattered even the temporary amelioration of relations previously fostered by a protracted stalemate on the Russia-Manchuria boundary dispute.<sup>166</sup>

While clearly recognizing that Soviet-Japanese relations were deteriorating, Grew's assessment of Japan's relations with the U.S. was somewhat more optimistic. There were, of course, a number of potentially threatening issues, notably rearmament. With the termination of the Washington Naval Treaty, the "suspicion and uneasiness" which could be engendered by a naval arms race would inevitably cause tension.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, Japanese aggression in China would be a source of friction if it interfered with American interests, while American bases in the Philippines had long been a potential point of contention. Though these concerns were pressing, the Ambassador did not believe they were sufficient to justify a pessimistic outlook for 1937:

... there is very good reason to feel that the Japanese Government values American friendship, especially in view of Japan's increasing difficulties with other nations, and will not purposely alienate the United States unless situations arise where Japan considers her own national interests to be acutely involved.<sup>168</sup>

Grew's prediction was further supported by the mood in Britain where anti-Japanese sentiment was on the rise as a result of the Keelung incident (in which some British sailors

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<sup>165</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 4 December 1936, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/paw/078.html>

<sup>166</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 1 January 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 1-11

<sup>167</sup> Grew, *Ten Years in Japan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944) pp 192-193

<sup>168</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 1 January 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 2

were allegedly assaulted by Japanese policemen) as well as ongoing trade misgivings. Grew believed that Japan would gravitate towards the U.S. if its relations struggled with other powers.<sup>169</sup> Though it is difficult to fault Grew for his optimistic outlook for 1937, there can be little doubt that it did not last late into that year.

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<sup>169</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 1 January 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 1-11

**CHAPTER III**  
**AN ACCELERATING DESCENT**

On December 12, 1936, while visiting the city of Sian to oversee the suppression of Communist elements there, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Commander of China's armies and head of China's ruling Kuomintang party, was taken captive by one of his senior officers, Chang Hsueh-liang. Hsueh-liang was actually the subordinate of an older and more politically ruthless General named Yang Hu-Cheng. Yang, Chiang Kai-shek's "Pacification Commissioner," was responsible for suppressing regional Communist forces but he had become a strong proponent of the idea that the Nanking Government should cease its military operations against Communists and declare war on Japan. Chiang's captors dispatched a telegram to China's leaders outlining eight demands aimed at reorganizing the government and terminating the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communists. Interestingly, while Chinese public opinion condemned the kidnapping and Chinese military leaders almost universally declared their loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek, armed conflict did not erupt between the rebels and the Kuomintang armies.<sup>170</sup> Instead, after nearly two weeks of negotiations, Chiang agreed to a peace settlement between the Kuomintang and the Communists in order to form a united front against their common enemy, Japan. While Chiang was subsequently released to much fanfare on Christmas Day and wasted little time having Chang Hsueh-liang court-martialled and sentenced for insubordination, he held up his end of the mysterious agreement: his forces suspended their efforts to suppress the Communists and the civil war ground to a halt.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> *The China Situation*, 22 December 1936, President's Secretary's File [PSF], Diplomatic Files [DF], China 1933-1936, Box 26, FDRL

<sup>171</sup> Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company inc, 1999) pp 407-409

International audiences had difficulty deciding what to make of the entire affair. The incident garnered only small mention in American newspapers, and most journalists seemed satisfied with the explanation that Chiang had been kidnapped by mutineers opposed to his government.<sup>172</sup> Some reporters wrote that the event was actually the work of those seeking to terminate the Chinese civil war, arguing that Chiang had been in danger from other Kuomintang members and that his captors sincerely desired a safe audience with him. Upset by China's failure to prevent vast swaths of territory from falling into Japanese hands, these 'rebels' pleaded their case in the hope of shifting the balance in power away from what they saw as a treacherous government and towards Communist nationalism.<sup>173</sup> This view was given credibility by the absence of armed conflict in the Sian region during and after Chiang's capture. American observers reported in early January that although tension between the rebels and Kuomintang armies remained high, it did not seem unstable enough to merit serious apprehension.<sup>174</sup> Whether the Sian incident was a mutiny against Chiang or an elaborate effort to save him from Kuomintang corruption, his domestic prestige became greater than ever.

The drama was not lost on Japanese officials who had long expressed dissatisfaction with China's inability to produce a single ruling entity with whom they could cooperate. They thought Chiang could fill this role but also appreciated that any political realignment in Nanking would likely be hostile to Japan. If Japan assumed a nonprovocative attitude towards China, the unification of Chinese leadership could lead to a period of improved Sino-Japanese relations.<sup>175</sup> In March, the new Japanese Cabinet under former Imperial

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<sup>172</sup> Borg, pp 218-220

<sup>173</sup> "Anti-Chiang Plot is Laid to Nanking," *The New York Times*, 12 January 1937

<sup>174</sup> *Situation in the Far East*, 9 January 1937, PSF, DF, China, 1937, Box 26, FDRL

<sup>175</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 5 March, 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 34-35

Commander Hayashi Senjurō made this a top priority. The policy changes were spearheaded by Hayashi's new Foreign Minister, Satō Naotake, a particularly bright light for Western observers as he had served as Ambassador to Paris and had a reputation as a pro-Western moderate. Living up to expectations, Satō gave a stirring speech to the Diet in which he expressed the belief that Japan's relations with foreign powers were largely dependant upon its relations with China. As such, Japan would take a more conciliatory tone towards China in order to improve relations with other countries.<sup>176</sup> Matters became more complicated, however, when Satō expressed his belief that Japan could avoid a crisis conflict in the Far East by walking a "straightforward and dignified" path. This assertion directly contradicted comments Hayashi had made during his own term as Foreign Minister, notably his assessment that the Far East "might explode at a touch." Certain I.J.A. circles saw the comments as an abandonment of pro-expansionist policies that had benefited their cause since the Manchurian incident and a return instead to the policies of former Foreign Minister Kijūrō Shidehara whose liberal and pro-Chiang Kai-shek policies of the 1920s were seen as detrimental to the aggrandisement of the Japanese Empire. In particular, concern brewed that the Kwangtung Army, whose control over Manchukuo had established it as an entity with significant political clout, would not accept any policy change regarding China which threatened its dominant position on the mainland.<sup>177</sup>

Despite this controversy, Satō continued to direct policies towards improving relations with China since this was central to his efforts in strengthening Japan's ties to the West. In particular, the new Japanese Cabinet wanted to rebuild its position vis-à-vis Great Britain as these relations had steadily declined following the Leith-Ross failure in 1935 to

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<sup>176</sup> *Ambassador Grew to the Secretary of State*, 11 March, 1937, PSF, Confidential File [CF], Box 22, Japan Dispatches, FDRL

<sup>177</sup> *Ambassador Grew to the Secretary of State*, 12 March 1937, PSF, CF, Box 22, Japan Dispatches, FDRL

gain Japanese cooperation for joint investment in China. Old grudges had continued to fester despite awareness in Tokyo that they had become a serious impediment to improved Anglo-Japanese relations.<sup>178</sup> Most importantly to the British, the Anti-Comintern Pact had been poorly received in London, adding a new level of tension. As Sir Robert Vansittart had argued in December 1936, the effect of the pact was, "... to introduce Japan into the orbit of European affairs at a particularly delicate and dangerous phase, and to increase the probability that, in given circumstances, Germany and Japan will now act together."<sup>179</sup> Since this potential alliance threatened Britain's attempt to curtail Germany, London concluded that the best counter-policy would be to develop a new bond with Japan that would make Anglo-Japanese relations a greater priority for Japan than would ties with Germany.<sup>180</sup> In essence, Britain wished to restore some semblance of the status quo afforded by a friendless Germany in the post-war era.

Thus, while Britain and Japan had good reasons to be at odds, both wanted to improve their relationship. One method would be a new agreement regarding China, where British prestige had grown as the Sian Incident skewed Chinese sentiment against Japan.<sup>181</sup> Talks began concerning provision of significant loans to China for the construction of new railways throughout its central and southern regions which would produce significant revenue for both countries. In a symbolic display of support, China dispatched a high-ranking delegation to Britain for the coronation of King George VI. In turn, the British Ambassador to China travelled extensively throughout China expounding a British policy of

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<sup>178</sup> *Sir R. Clive (Tokyo) to Foreign Office, 27 January 1937, DBFP, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 76-77*

<sup>179</sup> *The World Situation and British Rearmament: Vansittart Memorandum, 16 December 1936, DBFP, Series 2, Vol. 17, appendix II, p 776*

<sup>180</sup> Best, pp 28-29

<sup>181</sup> *Ambassador Grew to the Secretary of State, 16 April, 1937, PSF, CF, Box 22, Japan Dispatches, FDRL*

mutual sympathy and good will.<sup>182</sup> As Japan struggled to find positive elements in its Chinese position for use as a foundation for improved relations with the West, Britain enjoyed great success with the Chinese. Britain's capacity to serve as an intermediary could be used as leverage in exchange for the agreement it desired, a counter to the Anti-Comintern Pact.

In a sudden turnaround, Japan expressed regret for the Keelung Incident and formally recognized the improper conduct of the Japanese policemen involved, an exceedingly rare admission. Satō expressed his wish for an “understanding similar in purpose or in spirit to the former (Anglo-Japanese) alliance.”<sup>183</sup> While renewing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance may not have been what Whitehall had in mind, Japan's clear desire to come to an amicable agreement triggered what historian Antony Best described as “a wave of optimism” among British officials. It prompted the promotion of Sir Robert Craigie, a diplomat with proven negotiating skills and a clearly illustrated desire to improve relations with Japan, as the new Ambassador to Tokyo. An outspoken advocate of a non-aggression pact between Japan, Britain, and the United States, Craigie's appointment substantiated Britain's aim of seeking a better relationship with Japan.<sup>184</sup> His connections to influential Japanese politicians would assist him in leading the drive to implement reforms to improve Anglo-Japanese relations.<sup>185</sup>

On May 14, at a London imperial conference where Dominion Prime Ministers had gathered for the coronation, Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons called for a Pacific non-aggression pact. He suggested that conversations with Ambassador Yoshida might lead

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<sup>182</sup> *Sino-British Relations of the Month of March, 1937*, 12 April 1937, State Department Records, RG 59, 1930-39, Box 4256, National Archives and Records Administration, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland [NARA]

<sup>183</sup> *Ambassador Grew to the Secretary of State*, 16 April, 1937, PSF, CF, Box 22 Japan Dispatches, FDRL

<sup>184</sup> *British Policy in the Far East*, 5 May 1937, State Department Records, RG 84, Foreign Service Posts of the Dept. of State, Japan, Tokyo, General Records 1936-1941, Box 23, NARA

<sup>185</sup> Best, p 30



to a pact with all countries in the Pacific. The proposition met with mixed reaction and ultimately was rejected by both Japan and the U.S. Although eager to pursue an agreement with Britain, a broad agreement which included the U.S. had not been one of its immediate goals. Satō and Ambassador Grew both agreed that an understanding between Britain, Japan and the U.S. was admirable but premature.<sup>186</sup> Satō added that while the absence of any “vexing issues, political or otherwise” between Japan and America would strengthen their relationship, there existed no connection between a non-aggression pact that included the U.S. and a rapprochement with Britain. He expressed interest in the concept of a tripartite agreement but left it at that.<sup>187</sup>

In Washington, a Pacific-wide non-aggression pact had already been considered as a means of reducing tension in the Far East. On November 16, 1936, Roosevelt had suggested an “agreement for the disarmament of practically everything in the Pacific.”<sup>188</sup> The proposal evoked a negative response from the State Department in the form of an exhaustive memorandum which stated that a ‘neutralization’ of the Pacific would either be to the clear disadvantage of the United States or that of other parties concerned and thus unlikely to be accepted. With the Far East in a current period of flux, it was ill-timed because, “it is axiomatic that political agreements, to be successful, should have a basis of reasonably satisfactory economic equilibrium and of mutual confidence and goodwill.” Finally, while the American public generally supported efforts to promote peace, it opposed any international agreement that did not offer “reasonable promise of something substantial

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<sup>186</sup> Trotter, pp 199-200

<sup>187</sup> *Telegram from Ambassador Grew to the Secretary of State*, 11 May, 1937, RG 84, Foreign Service Posts 1937, Box 24, Correspondence: American Embassy Tokyo, NARA

<sup>188</sup> Ickes, Harold L., *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) Vol. 2, p 7

being obtained.”<sup>189</sup> Roosevelt’s response was one of barely concealed fury. Lambasting the entire piece, he concluded that it was ‘defeatist’ thinking and of no value to a realist such as himself.<sup>190</sup>

In April, the President sent Norman Davis to Europe, ostensibly to attend the International Sugar Conference, but in reality to sound out British opinions about neutralizing the Pacific.<sup>191</sup> Washington had been unimpressed with an earlier British proposal to maintain Article 19 of the Washington Treaty, which froze the fortification of Pacific bases, as there were no guarantees that Japan would not violate the treaty as it had violated “almost every international instrument to which she had set her name.” However, when Davis outlined FDR’s proposal to completely neutralize the area covered by Article 19, Britain did not like the idea of dismantling its installations in Hong Kong when the U.S. had just pointed out that Japan could not be trusted to follow suit.<sup>192</sup> Ironically, this rejection echoed Davis’ own views, as he had earlier pointed out that it was difficult to enter into a pact with any country that had so flagrantly violated existing treaties. Additionally, any such agreement would imply, however indirectly, that the U.S. was condoning Japan’s recent aggressive actions in China, a stance unacceptable in Washington.<sup>193</sup> As negotiations continued, a common thread developed. Both Washington and London wanted an agreement restoring balance in the Pacific but neither could bring itself to trust Japan, a country that had so frequently betrayed their own trust.

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<sup>189</sup> *Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State on the Neutralization of the Islands of the Pacific*, 16 February 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 954-972

<sup>190</sup> *Memorandum by President Roosevelt to the Secretary of State*, 1 March 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 973-974

<sup>191</sup> Borg, p 271

<sup>192</sup> *Mr. Eden to Sir. R. Lindsay (Washington)*, 3 May 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 113-113

<sup>193</sup> *Mr. Norman H. Davis to the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 23 March 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 974-975

China was perplexed by how Britain or the U.S. could consider a new agreement with Japan. On May 4, Chiang Kai-shek contacted the British Ambassador to China, Sir Hugh Knatchbull-Hugessen, to note that despite its good intentions, Britain was in danger of being hoodwinked by Japan.<sup>194</sup> He even expressed concern that in the event of a serious situation developing, Japan would likely use distraction abroad to prevent western involvement. Suspicious of any suggestion that Japan had a 'special position' in China, Nanking officials feared that improving Japanese relations with Britain and the U.S. would preclude the continuation of good Sino-American and Anglo-Chinese relations. Knatchbull-Hugessen reassured Chiang that Chinese interests would not be jeopardized. The Chinese Foreign Minister doubted that any non-aggression pact in the Pacific would ever become formalized.<sup>195</sup> With the continuing promise of Satō's liberal, pro-western attitude, it appeared as though there was a chance of a lasting settlement between Japan and the West.

Any hope that the Hayashi Cabinet could move Japanese foreign policy along a more conciliatory path was short-lived. On March 31, Hayashi unexpectedly dissolved the Lower House of Parliament in order to realign the government more closely with his own position. Unfortunately the move was deemed "anti-constitutional" by its opponents, weakening Hayashi's position by antagonizing those who had brought him to office.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, in early May Tokyo received reports that Chiang was actively rearming his forces in preparation for military action against Japan, possibly after allying China with the Soviets.<sup>197</sup> The reports indicated that Chiang was using anti-Japanese sentiment to strengthen national unity, a course Japanese officials judged he would continue to employ until Manchukuo was

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<sup>194</sup> Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen (Nanking) to Mr. Eden, 4 May 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 115-116

<sup>195</sup> Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen (Nanking) to Mr. Eden, 22 May 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 124-125

<sup>196</sup> Sims, p 237

<sup>197</sup> Barnhart, Michael, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1987) p 82

returned to China. The American Ambassador in Nanking expressed concern that anti-Japanese sentiment had become “a part of the Chinese racial consciousness.” The American Counsellor in Peking expressed parallel fears that a dangerous situation could ensue given the Chinese armies’ “growing belief in their own prowess.”<sup>198</sup>

The threat of a Chinese-Soviet alliance and mounting opposition in the Diet led Prime Minister Hayashi to resign on June 4 after only four months in office. Prince Konoe Fumimaro took his place. Konoe came from a powerful aristocratic family and, although not especially charismatic, was well liked, particularly among Japanese intellectuals who believed that his education at one of Japan’s more liberally minded institutions made him an ideal candidate for contending with the military’s growing political clout. As a member of Japan’s delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Konoe was understood as skilled in addressing foreign policy problems and had been appointed largely in the hope that he could deal with the Chinese dilemma.<sup>199</sup> Hirota Kōki, the man Hayashi Senjūrō had replaced as Prime Minister, was appointed as Foreign Minister for the second time in his career. Hirota wasted no time proclaiming his intention to continue Satō’s work towards an Anglo-Japanese rapprochement.<sup>200</sup>

Despite its popularity, the Konoe government proved weak and indecisive. Konoe demonstrated little evidence of the socialist thinking his supporters had hoped for. Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, he had become the nominal leader of Japan’s fascist forces. By mid-June 1937, the new Cabinet had changed course from the Satō’s liberal path as Konoe,

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<sup>198</sup> Crowley, James, *Japan’s Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) p 319

<sup>199</sup> Nish, *Japanese Foreign Policy, 1869-1942*, pp 218-219

<sup>200</sup> *Mr. Dodds (Tokyo) to Mr. Eden*, 7 June 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 138

chosen to solve the China problem, instead oversaw its degeneration.<sup>201</sup> China regarded the abolition of the East Hopei Regime and the total cessation of smuggling into North China, two irregularities directly resulting from of the Tangku Truce, as minimum requisites for an agreement with Japan. The Kono Government did not accept the conditions, electing to cling to the puppet regimes it had created. On June 25, Japan's Ambassador to China Kowagoe issued a press statement outlining two key Japanese demands. Firstly, China was to fully recognize Japan's right to expansion and the resultant relations between Manchukuo and North China. Secondly, the Tangku Truce and the Ho-Umetsu agreement, the latter a secret agreement granting the Kwangtung Army control over Hopei province and establishing the East Hopei Autonomous Council as a puppet regime, could not be abrogated.<sup>202</sup> The announcement was poorly received in China where the press lamented the failure of liberalism in Japan.<sup>203</sup> When a press statement attributed to the Kwangtung Army Headquarters warned the Chinese against "repeated publication of malicious and groundless reports, reflecting upon the prestige of Japanese troops and stirring Chinese sentiment against Japan and Manchukuo," apprehension grew in the West that Japan's military would again take independent action against China. These fears heightened as it became clear that Japanese threats did not diminish Chinese resolve. China regarded its own conditions as absolute minimum requirements and China's leaders, now unified under Chiang Kai-shek, would not back down.<sup>204</sup> Unwilling to relinquish control over Chinese territory deemed essential for national defense, Japan mobilized troops to reinforce forces already stationed

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<sup>201</sup> Nish, *Japanese Foreign Policy, 1869-1942*, pp 218-219

<sup>202</sup> Angwin, W.A. *The China Incident: A Narrative of Events Relative to the Flag U.S. Asiatic Fleet Occurring in the First Six Months of the Sino-Japanese Conflict Including an Account of the Sinking of the U.S.S. Panay*, (Shanghai, China: 1938) p 5. Unpublished: Contained in *The Papers of Admiral Harry E. Yarnell*, Library of Congress [LOC], Washington, D.C.

<sup>203</sup> *Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen (Peking) to Mr. Eden*, 29 June 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 147

<sup>204</sup> Angwin, p 5

near Peking. In an atmosphere of high tension, efforts towards collaboration slowly dissolved.<sup>205</sup>

By July, strain between the two countries had reached a point wherein any insult, however trivial, could transfer national grievances onto the field of battle. An incident soon occurred. On July 7, Japanese forces incorporated the Marco Polo Bridge, an important strategic point located ten miles west of Peking, into part of their night-time “manoeuvres.” Ostensibly firing their weapons in simulation of combat conditions, the Japanese provoked nearby Chinese troops into returning fire, though without causing casualties. However, when one Japanese soldier went missing, his commanding officer, believing that he had been taken prisoner, ordered an outright attack on the Chinese position, resulting in losses on both sides. While representatives hastily attempted to negotiate a ceasefire, troops continued to clash violently.<sup>206</sup> What had begun as a minor skirmish soon escalated.

When Hull arrived at his office on July 8, 1937, cables from the American Ambassadors in both China and Japan described the event as an isolated incident best left settled by local authorities.<sup>207</sup> Grew even reported on the likelihood of a “favourable settlement” for the “brush” which had occurred just outside Peking.<sup>208</sup> But the fighting intensified. By July 10, inquiries by the United States Naval Attaché revealed that the Japanese had long desired control of the strategically valuable Marco Polo Bridge. Moreover, the Japanese had used the outbreak of hostilities as a pretext for extending their influence in North China.<sup>209</sup> Presumably Japan hoped to wrest control of North China

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<sup>205</sup> Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, pp 79-84

<sup>206</sup> Spence, pp 420-422

<sup>207</sup> Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p 3

<sup>208</sup> *The American Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 8 July 1937, *FRUS Japan: 1931-1937*, Vol. 1, pp 314-315

<sup>209</sup> Angwin, p 9

quickly and cheaply just as the Mukden Incident had dropped Manchuria into its lap. As Hull's chief Asian advisor, Hornbeck advised against taking any premature "mediatory action" that might aggravate the situation. Instead, he suggested that the American and British governments cease all talks with Japan on Far Eastern issues and inform the Japanese that any large-scale outbreak of hostilities would be looked upon with great disfavour.<sup>210</sup> To the Japanese Ambassador, Hull urged restraint: "A great civilized first-class power like Japan, not only can afford to exercise general self-restraint, but in the long run it is far better that this should characterize its attitude and policy."<sup>211</sup> On July 13, Hull asked the Japanese Ambassador "Do you really feel that war will be avoided?" The Ambassador immediately replied that it would, with Hull astutely concluding that the Ambassador's remark was the only response he would have received in either case.<sup>212</sup>

London's reaction was to disregard the event as a minor skirmish.<sup>213</sup> However, on July 12, Britain's military intelligence bureau produced a memorandum noting that while Tokyo might wish to end the fighting, it would have trouble restraining local Japanese officers.<sup>214</sup> Britain's Chargé d'Affaires in Tokyo, James Dodds, reported that the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires believed that Japan, "gambling on the preoccupation of Europe with its own affairs," had intentionally started the incident in the belief that the Soviet Union had been weakened by recent executions of many Soviet generals.<sup>215</sup> The same day, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden met with Ambassador Yoshida to warn that a British settlement

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<sup>210</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 12 July 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 144

<sup>211</sup> Hull, p 534

<sup>212</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation between the Secretary of State and the Japanese Ambassador*, 13 July 1937. *FDR and Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 6, pp 128-131

<sup>213</sup> Shai, Aron, *Origins of the War in the East, Britain, China and Japan 1937-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1976) p 21

<sup>214</sup> Best, p 38

<sup>215</sup> *Mr. Dodds (Tokyo) to Mr. Eden*, 12 July 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 152

with Japan “would hardly be possible if existing conditions near Peking persisted or grew worse.”<sup>216</sup> Eden approved Dodds’ proposal to approach Hirota to ascertain Japan’s sincerity in reaching an understanding with Britain versus allowing the situation in North China to become a “second Manchukuo.”<sup>217</sup> Japan countered that it had no intention of fighting in China and expressed its hope that Britain would encourage China to reach a compromise. It also pointed out that British support of China might make Japan reluctant to pursue talks with Britain. Dr. Aron Shai postulated that this was a “calculated attempt on the part of the Japanese to press Britain to back down from what were considered in Japan to be her pro-Chinese tendencies.”<sup>218</sup>

Prime Minister Konoe, claiming the incident was “entirely the result of an anti-Japanese military action on the part of China,” demanded that Chinese authorities apologize for their illegal action.<sup>219</sup> With Konoe’s approval, the I.J.A. increased the number of soldiers in the Peking area from approximately 6,000 before July 7 to some 20,000 by July 17.<sup>220</sup> Japan also presented China with a list of demands for a peaceful resolution. China was to withdraw all of its troops from the fighting zone. The soldiers responsible for the outbreak of hostilities were to be punished. All anti-Japanese activities in northern China were to stop, and the Nanking government must support the Japanese-led anti-Communist movement.<sup>221</sup> However, Japan’s mobilization and diplomatic posturing met a resolute response from China. On July 9, Chiang announced that he would dispatch forces to the region. Four Kuomintang

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<sup>216</sup> *Mr. Eden to Mr. Dodds (Tokyo)*, 12 July 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 154-155

<sup>217</sup> *Mr. Dodds (Tokyo) to Mr. Eden*, 12 July 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 155

<sup>218</sup> Shai, pp 21-23

<sup>219</sup> Crowley, pp 331 and 335

<sup>220</sup> Angwin, pp 9-10

<sup>221</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 14 July 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 167-170



army divisions began moving towards Hopei Province by July 14.<sup>222</sup> Chiang then made an address in which he listed China's requirements: the protection of China's sovereignty, the protection of the Hopei-Chahar Council – the mechanism through which China retained control over its provinces in North China – and the protection of officials representing the Nanking government. Chiang concluded his address with a bold statement: "If we allow one inch more of our territory to be lost, we shall be guilty of an unpardonable crime against our race."<sup>223</sup>

As Japan and China mobilized for war, the U.S. and Britain searched for appropriate responses. On July 16, Hull issued a formal statement on America's position, underscoring the seriousness of the developing conflict:

Any situation in which armed hostilities are in progress or are threatened is a situation in which the rights and interests of all nations either are or may be seriously affected. There can be no serious hostilities anywhere in the world which will not one way or another affect interests or rights or obligations in this country.<sup>224</sup>

The rest of his statement was based largely upon his own "Eight Pillars of Peace" program, which he had devised for the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires in December 1936:

- (1) Peoples must be educated for peace. Each nation must make itself safe for peace.
- (2) Frequent conferences between representatives of nations, and intercourse between their peoples are essential.
- (3) The consummation of the five well-known peace agreements will provide adequate peace machinery
- (4) In the event of war in this hemisphere, there should be a common policy of neutrality.

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<sup>222</sup> Angwin, p 10

<sup>223</sup> Crowley, *A Reconsideration of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident*, p 186

<sup>224</sup> Finch, George A., "Secretary of State Hull's Pillars of Enduring Peace," in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October 1937) pp 688-693

- (5) The nations should adopt commercial policies to bring each that prosperity upon which enduring peace is founded.
- (6) Practical international cooperation is essential to restore many indispensable relationships between nations, and prevent the demoralization with which national character and conduct are threatened.
- (7) International law should be reestablished, revitalized and strengthened. Armies and navies are no permanent substitute for its great principles.
- (8) Faithful observance of undertakings between nations is the foundation of international order, and rests upon moral law, the highest of all law.<sup>225</sup>

While Hull had originally developed the Eight Pillars as moral building blocks for foreign policy in the Americas, they were easily adapted to fit the broader international context, and particularly the Far East. According to Hull, the U.S. advocated the following principles: the maintenance of peace; national and international self-restraint; abstinence from use of force in pursuit of policy and abstinence from interference in the internal affairs of other nations; solution of problems in international relations by processes of peaceful negotiation and agreement; faithful observance of international agreements; modification of provisions of treaties when the need arose by orderly processes carried out in a spirit of mutual helpfulness and accommodation; respect by all nations for the rights of others; performance by all nations of established obligations; revitalization and strengthening of international law in order to promote economic security and stability the world over; reduction in excessive barriers to international trade; effective equality of commercial opportunity and application of the principle of equality of treatment; and finally, limitation and reduction of armaments. To prevent his exhaustive list from giving the impression that Washington was definitely advocating collective security, Hull concluded with a reiteration of what had become a hallmark of American foreign policy: “We avoid entering into

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<sup>225</sup> Finch, George A., “Secretary of State Hull’s Pillars of Enduring Peace,” in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October 1937) pp 688-693

alliances or entangling commitments but we believe in cooperative effort by peaceful and practicable means in support of the principles hereinbefore stated.”<sup>226</sup>

Because American opinion opposed any kind of entangling relations with foreign powers, Hull could not risk his statement being viewed as suggesting that a U.S. response would involve such an arrangement. Instead, he had to simply express well established American principles. Aware that some might categorize his long list of principles as “vague formulae,” Hull had specific reasons for restating them as often as possible in speeches and statements. He sought to edge the American people away from the “slough of isolation into which so many had sunk” towards a more involved global outlook. He also hoped to induce other nations to adopt them as the cornerstone of their foreign policy so that their people might object to or resist war.<sup>227</sup> Moreover, Hull also saw an opportunity to justify Roosevelt’s continuing program of naval expansion. In his statement, he noted that, “Realizing the necessity for maintaining armed forces adequate for national security, we are prepared to reduce or to increase our own armed forces in proportion to reductions or increases made by other countries.”<sup>228</sup> This appealed to isolationists as a call for home defense and to internationalists wanting to see world interaction increase.

If Hull had hoped to elicit a passionate response from the world, he was sorely disappointed. The German Reich responded that the basic principle of its own foreign policy “is, as is generally known, directed toward the regulation of international relations by pacific agreement and hence coincides with the ideas developed by the Secretary of State.” Fascist Italy asserted that it “appreciates at their high value the principles enunciated by Secretary of

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<sup>226</sup> *Statement by the Secretary of State*, 16 July 1937, Franklin Roosevelt Papers, Papers as President: Official File [OF], Box 4, File 150c: Chinese-Japanese War, FDRL

<sup>227</sup> Hull, p 536

<sup>228</sup> *Statement by the Secretary of State*, 16 July 1937, Franklin Roosevelt Papers, OF, Box 4, File 150c: Chinese-Japanese War, FDRL

State Hull.” The Japanese government, while concurring in general, believed that the objectives would only be attained in the Far East by a full recognition and practical consideration of the particular circumstances of that region.<sup>229</sup> Welles, rarely a fan of Hull’s methods, later wrote that Hull’s “pious remonstrances . . . proved as a deterrent to be as potent as the proverbial snowball in Hell.”<sup>230</sup>

On July 20, British Ambassador to the U.S. Ronald Lindsay approached Hull to suggest that France, the U.S. and Britain put forth a formal and tripartite appeal urging China and Japan to end the conflict. While Hull broadly questioned the efficacy of any joint action unless it encompassed a show of force, especially since Japan and China were already committed to military action, he offered three specific objections: it would create the impression that the West was unifying to bring pressure on Japan, a policy which the Japanese military could use to agitate domestic opinion against the West; it would exclude other nations with a vested interest in the Far East; and most tellingly, it would arouse the animosity of U.S. isolationists. Hull instead encouraged parallel but independent action, a suggestion the British reluctantly accepted.<sup>231</sup>

Opting for the traditional American approach, Hull invited the Japanese and Chinese Ambassadors to his office in an effort to settle things personally. In separate conversations, Hull emphasized that the American government was willing to do anything short of mediation, which would require the mutual agreement of all parties involved, to contribute fairly and impartially toward solving the controversy. Indicating an “intense desire” felt by the U.S. to achieve peace everywhere compelled him to earnestly approach each government

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<sup>229</sup> Department of State, *Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy, 1931-1941* [*Peace and War*], (United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1943) p 46

<sup>230</sup> Welles, Sumner, *Seven Major Decisions* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951) p 79

<sup>231</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 21 July 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 227-228

to contribute something positive, Hull feared that a war would do irreparable harm to all countries involved and prove "utterly disastrous" to human welfare and progress.<sup>232</sup> While the meetings afforded Hull an opportunity to personally reiterate the moral policies outlined in his July 16 address and the "Eight Pillars of Peace," in neither instance did he provide any concrete advice as to how either country could resolve the deadlock. Although it was clear that America's 'good offices' were available, the value of the offer was less obvious.

A major factor preventing Hull from formulating a more effective response derived from Washington's indecision over American neutrality. When the 1936 Neutrality Act expired on May 1, 1937, it had been replaced by a bill featuring many of its central tenets: a mandatory arms embargo, a ban on loans and credits of combatant nations, and a ban on American nationals travelling on ships of belligerent nations. It also gave the President the power to sell non-embargoed goods to warring states on a cash-and-carry basis. Whereas the 1936 Act had applied only to international conflict, the new act could also apply to instances of civil war.<sup>233</sup> When Roosevelt signed it on May 1, it is unlikely he expected it to be called into action less than three months later. By July 20, after being queried about applying the Neutrality Act in the Far East, FDR avoided giving a firm answer, reflecting America's difficulty in assessing the Far Eastern situation.<sup>234</sup>

Nobody was more disappointed by Washington's lack of action than the Chinese. Backed into a corner and forced to choose between leading China to war or being swept aside by popular sentiment, Chiang Kai-shek had eagerly awaited the Anglo-American mediation he felt would lead to a peaceful solution consistent with his stated requirements

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<sup>232</sup> *Memorandum by the Secretary of State Regarding a Conversation With the Japanese Ambassador (Saito)*, 21 July 1937, *Peace and War*, pp 371-374

<sup>233</sup> Cole, p 233

<sup>234</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin, *Complete Presidential Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, No. 382, 20 July 1937, Vol. 10

for a rapprochement. He was chagrined to note that America seemed to avoid any productive cooperation with Britain, pointing out that an outbreak of general war, inevitable if things continued along the current path, would negatively affect both the U.S. and Britain. Furthermore the U.S., as a signatory of the Nine-Power Treaty, had a moral obligation to work with Britain to maintain peace.<sup>235</sup>

Washington's lack of action did not, however, mean that the administration was not mulling over possible schemes to halt Japanese aggression. Roosevelt first discussed with Welles in July a plan to "impose upon Japan a trade embargo to be enforced by units of the American and British Navies stationed at strategic points in the Pacific." If the American and British markets that Japan relied upon were denied, Roosevelt foresaw that Japan could not continue pressing into China. Welles cautioned that this would almost certainly result in war since Japan's government was in the firm grasp of the Japanese army. Convinced that Japan's heavy commitment in China was stretching its economy to the breaking point, Roosevelt thought a denial of trade would bog down Japanese forces to the extent that Japan could not risk war. Welles cautioned there were no guarantees that Britain would comply with such a scheme. Roosevelt only hoped that the Chamberlain government "would not only have more 'guts' than its predecessor, but that it might be able to see that the survival of the British Commonwealth was at stake." Yet Roosevelt abandoned this plan, and Welles, knowing that Chief of Naval Operations Admiral William Leahy favoured the plan, never learned why. It may have been that Hull opposed it or that the Navy Department advised that such a blockade would incite a war for which the U.S. Navy was ill-prepared. Welles' best guess was that Roosevelt may have determined that an isolationist Congress in an isolationist country would refuse to support any action which entailed "even the remotest

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<sup>235</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State, 25 July 1937, FRUS 1937, Vol. 3, pp 256-258*

possibility of war.” In any case, this incident sheds some light on the President’s famous Quarantine Speech later that year.<sup>236</sup>

By the end of July, American officials in Nanking learned that Chiang intended to sever all diplomatic relations with Japan and prepare for a bitter fight.<sup>237</sup> China’s Ambassador to America, C.T. Wang, asked Hull to invoke the Nine-Power Treaty so that China could more effectively resist Japan. Under the impression that Britain was willing to take a stronger stance provided America was willing to go along and that the U.S. was disinclined to do so, Wang indicated they could have an “unfortunate” effect on China’s opinion of America. Hull was vaguely negative, indicating “he must refrain from trying to speak for the British” for fear of giving the wrong impression.<sup>238</sup> On August 6, Wang again inquired about invoking the treaty as China had received promising reports that Britain’s Foreign Secretary had met with the American Ambassador to discuss the subject. This time Hull’s response was more firm: there were no new developments regarding the Nine Power Treaty and America would be guided by events as they took place without commenting on the subject of future action.<sup>239</sup>

This was not the first time China had been disappointed by America’s desire to watch from the sidelines as Hull’s actions in 1937 bore a stark resemblance to Stimson’s 1932 doctrine of non-recognition. In both instances America’s policymakers had resigned themselves, despite personal misgivings, to watching events from the sidelines as American isolationism precluded a more assertive attitude, a point not lost on the Chinese. Desperate

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<sup>236</sup> Welles, *Seven Decisions*, pp 80-81

<sup>237</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 29, July 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 307

<sup>238</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck) of a Conversation between the Secretary of State and the Chinese Ambassador (C.T. Wang)*, 31 July 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 306-308

<sup>239</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hornbeck)*, 6 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 333-334

for support, Wang again approached Hull on August 20. Indicating that China was considering an appeal to the League of Nations, he wished to know if Washington would consult with other powers about applying the Nine-Power Treaty; Hull simply asked if his statement of July 16 did not sufficiently cover Washington's position. Wang acknowledged the moral rectitude of Washington's principled stance but insisted that China needed action.<sup>240</sup> In an interview with an American Professor in Nanking, Chiang voiced his frustration:

I am truly disappointed that the United States did not cooperate with England in an attempt to avert the present crisis which could have been averted by joint representation to Japan and China. China and the world will long remember Simon's failure to cooperate with the United States in 1931 regarding Manchuria and now Britain will long remember the failure of the United States to cooperate.<sup>241</sup>

Hull, seeing no parallel between 1931 and 1937, considered this an unfair assessment as the U.S. was "taking repeated action and bringing all pressure it possessed to bear to stop the fighting."<sup>242</sup> As the conflict in China moved south, it remained to be seen whether America could overcome domestic isolationism to defend some of its more valuable assets.

By the evening of July 29, Chinese resistance near Peking had completely collapsed under the onslaught of Japan's more advanced forces.<sup>243</sup> As the Chinese retreated south, the center of attention shifted towards Shanghai. No ordinary Chinese city, Shanghai was the fourth largest city in the world with an international quarter populated by 40,000 foreign nationals. The quarter was divided into separate, self-governed sectors which existed due to a system of extraterritorial rights, permitting each power to protect its sector with a small

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<sup>240</sup> *Memorandum by the Advisor on Political Relations (Hornbeck)*, 20 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 3-5

<sup>241</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 23 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 460-461

<sup>242</sup> Hull, p 539

<sup>243</sup> Angwin, p 15



military force. Housing many important banks and trading houses and serving as the hub of incoming and outgoing trade in China, no city was more fundamentally important to the East Asia economy. It was of utmost importance to all Western powers that the conflict not engulf the city.<sup>244</sup>

On August 9, tensions in Shanghai intensified with the shooting of a Japanese lieutenant and seaman, supposedly by the Chinese Peace Preservation Corps.<sup>245</sup> On August 10, seeking to safeguard the city, Hull dispatched Ambassador Grew to meet with Foreign Minister Hirota to offer U.S. assistance to end the hostilities.<sup>246</sup> Hirota, uninterested in any arrangement that required acceptance of Chinese demands, retorted that the most effective action would be to encourage Chiang Kai-shek to make a prompt offer of peace. On August 11, Japan reinforced its presence in Shanghai with an additional thousand soldiers.<sup>247</sup> In a major military and strategic gamble, Chiang Kai-shek chose to deflect Japan's northern progress by launching a full scale assault in and around Shanghai as his forces, including his best German trained divisions there, outnumbered the Japanese by a ratio of greater than 10 to 1.<sup>248</sup> By August 13 the fighting had moved into the city<sup>249</sup> where it immediately produced a heavy death toll. On August 14, inexperienced Chinese pilots, missing Japanese ships at anchor in the harbour, dropped their bombs into the crowded streets of the International Settlement, killing two thousand Chinese civilians and three Americans.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Herzog, James H. *Closing the Open Door* (U.S. Naval Institute: Annapolis, 1973) pp 13-14

<sup>245</sup> *The Consul General at Shanghai (Gauss) to the Secretary of State*, 10 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 366

<sup>246</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan (Grew)*, 7 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 353

<sup>247</sup> Lee, Bradford A., *Britain and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1939* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973) p 35

<sup>248</sup> Spence, p 422

<sup>249</sup> *The Consul General at Shanghai (Gauss) to the Secretary of State*, 13 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 404

<sup>250</sup> Angwin, pp 23-24

On August 16, Roosevelt and Hull approved a request by the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Harry Yarnell, for “about 1,000 Marines from the United States” to supplement those already safeguarding American citizens and to help with evacuation of foreign nationals. The fleet was more a collection of ships designed to demonstrate American presence than a balanced armada intended for combat operations. Consisting of the heavy cruiser *Augusta*, Yarnell’s flagship and the only modern vessel, twelve destroyers, six submarines, and six gunboats specially designed to traverse the Yangtze River, the fleet was never designed to repel attacks from either Japanese or Chinese military forces.<sup>251</sup> Yarnell’s request explicitly asked for Marines from America rather than soldiers from the much closer base in the Philippines because Yarnell anticipated a long and drawn out conflict better suited to the skills of Marines.<sup>252</sup>

Washington also received numerous demands from American citizens and organizations to withdraw all armed forces and all Americans from China. During a press conference on August 17, Hull summarized the dilemma facing American officials as they tried to formulate an appropriate response to the war in China:

One is the view of extreme internationalism, which rests upon the idea of political commitments. We keep entirely away from that in our thoughts and views and policies, just as we seek, on the other hand, to keep entirely away from the extreme nationalists who would tell all Americans that they must stay here at home and that, if they went abroad anywhere for any purpose - tourist, urgent business, or otherwise - and trouble overtook them and violence threatened, they must not expect any protection from their government.<sup>253</sup>

With 3,000 Americans living in Shanghai, Hull knew that removing troops would leave American lives at the mercy of an increasingly dangerous situation. Moreover, he believed

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<sup>251</sup> Herzog, pp 14-15

<sup>252</sup> *Memorandum by the Advisor on Political Relations (Hornbeck)*, 16 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 420-421 & Hull, p 540

<sup>253</sup> Hull, p 540

that a hasty retreat from the region would leave the impression that Americans could be bullied and insulted with impunity. Writing in his memoirs, Hull later commented that:

We in no sense contemplate any belligerent attitude toward anybody ... but we frankly do not feel disposed, by leaning back too far the other way, to give other countries a chance to suppose or to suggest that we are cowardly. If we want to be insulted fifty times a week, we only need to let the impression be gained that we did not protect our nationals and that in no circumstances would we be disposed to protect them.<sup>254</sup>

Aware that a Far East conflict would offend American sensibilities, Hull did not want to fight a war there. However, defending American people and property in China was an issue of moral principle that Roosevelt supported. To the press, Roosevelt explained the dispatch of 1,200 Marines as an essential action in response to “an inherited situation.” American forces had, after all, been in China since the turn of the century, and while it was his intent to get them out as fast as possible, it was not a practicable option at the time.<sup>255</sup> When a Gallup poll showed that nearly half of the East Coast favoured a withdrawal, Roosevelt told the press that while Americans in China were being urged to leave, they stayed at their own risk.<sup>256</sup>

Of greater significance than deployment of American forces was the question of applying the Neutrality Act. On August 17, when asked for details regarding application of the act to “this China-Japanese War which is not a war,” Roosevelt explained that the situation was complex. Unlike the Italo-Ethiopian conflict where a state of war had been formally recognized by both sides and diplomatic relations severed, Japan and China still maintained their diplomatic discourse, evidenced by the ongoing presence of China’s Ambassador in Tokyo. Roosevelt specified that he was on a “24-hour” basis with regard to

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<sup>254</sup> Hull, p 541

<sup>255</sup> Roosevelt, *The Complete Presidential Press Conferences*, No. 392, 17 August 1937, pp 161-165

<sup>256</sup> Dallek, p 146

applying the Neutrality Act.<sup>257</sup> In actuality, his administration was desperately trying to avoid the act – it would clearly advantage Japan, an industrialized nation that did not rely on foreign military aid, and disadvantage China which desperately required foreign imports to continue its resistance. In his diary, Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes remarked that it was “plain to see” that Hull wanted to do something about the hostilities in Shanghai, “without having any definite idea what to do.”<sup>258</sup>

On August 20, after a shell landed on the *Augusta*, killing one sailor, and with a group of twenty-four Congressmen urging him to invoke the act, Roosevelt told Hull that he could not postpone applying the Neutrality Act indefinitely. He was granted a brief reprieve on August 23 when Senator Key Pittman, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, explained to a nationwide radio audience that the Neutrality Act should not be imposed until there was either a clear declaration of war or neutral commerce was seriously jeopardized. On that same day, Hull issued a press statement explaining that while Washington was endeavouring to get U.S. citizens out of areas of special danger, it was fundamentally important that America retain a presence in China in defense of the principles outlined in his statement of July 16.<sup>259</sup> A week later, however, when Japan announced a blockade of China’s coast and it became publicly known that a U.S. government-owned vessel was delivering nineteen bomber aircraft to China, Roosevelt finally had to act. With groups vocally supporting either side of the debate, Roosevelt announced that government-owned ships would not be permitted to transport arms to either Japan or China. However, privately owned vessels could continue to conduct such trade at their own discretion, an

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<sup>257</sup> Roosevelt, *The Complete Presidential Press Conferences*, No. 392, 17 August 1937, pp 161-165

<sup>258</sup> Ickes, p 199

<sup>259</sup> *Press Release Issued by the Department of State*, 23 August 1937, *FRUS Japan*, Vol. 1, pp 355-357

effective compromise that would satisfy the isolationists while leaving the broader question of the Neutrality Act open.<sup>260</sup>

While Washington tackled the neutrality issue, Britain was busy formulating its own response. No Western power had a greater vested interest in Shanghai. Although its tone with China remained relatively mild, Britain's attitude towards Japan grew increasingly harsh despite the fact that only a few weeks had passed since the two countries had seemed poised to enact an agreement.<sup>261</sup> On August 16, a message to Japan's Foreign Ministry from the U.K. Foreign Office blamed Japan for the conflict, urged the withdrawal of Japanese forces in the city, and pointed to Japanese naval vessels anchored offshore as the greatest threat to the lives of non-combatants in Shanghai.<sup>262</sup> In a second note on August 20, the Foreign Office declared that public opinion in Britain and the rest of the world held Japan largely responsible for the events in Shanghai given that "the magnitude of [Japan's] operations has been out of all proportion to the comparatively trivial incident, the killing of two members of the Japanese landing party, which gave rise to them." If Britain had hoped to shame Japan into moderating its stance, it failed. British messages only irritated the Japanese, lending credibility to Hull's earlier decision against multi-lateral representation with Britain, and validity to Grew's concern that such a move would only stoke resentment in Tokyo.<sup>263</sup>

Concurrent with Britain's disapproval were a number of equally unsuccessful, locally organized efforts to end the hostilities. One plan by the Western Consulates in Shanghai called for a return to the status quo with a withdrawal of Chinese forces to a distance of two

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<sup>260</sup> Dallek, p 146-147

<sup>261</sup> Lee, p 36

<sup>262</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 16 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, p 426

<sup>263</sup> Lee, p 37 & *The Ambassador in Japan to the Secretary of State*, 13 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol.3, p 397

miles from the International Settlement. Though doubting its success, the American Consul General felt that it was “about all we could suggest,”<sup>264</sup> but the scheme collapsed when Chiang Kai-shek requested a formal guarantee that Japan would withdraw its troops from the city before he diverted any Chinese soldiers.<sup>265</sup> Japan refused to withdraw forces, arguing that it needed to protect Japanese nationals from hostilities caused by China in the first place.<sup>266</sup>

In a second plan, having determined that the essential obstacle to peace was the presence of Japanese military forces, the American, British, French, German and Italian Ambassadors in Nanking proposed that Japan pull out its soldiers if Chinese forces withdrew simultaneously and Western powers temporarily provided protection for Japanese nationals until they could also be evacuated. At a later date, Japan could increase its permitted security force in Shanghai by a reasonable number – perhaps one hundred.<sup>267</sup> This proposition died as Japan and China, as well as the Consuls at Shanghai, decided it would never work.<sup>268</sup> However, Britain used the idea as the basis for another plan presented to Japan and China on August 18. This also called for the withdrawal of Chinese and Japanese forces but envisaged soldiers of willing Western powers providing protection for Japanese nationals until the crisis ended. The Japanese replied on August 19 that they “could not at present accept [the proposal] ... because they were not convinced that foreign authorities had sufficient troops ... and because it was the duty of the Japanese government to protect

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<sup>264</sup> *The Consul General at Shanghai (Gauss) to the Secretary of State*, 13 August 1937, *FRUS* Japan, Vol. 1, p 346

<sup>265</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 13 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol.3, pp 397-398,

<sup>266</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 21 August 1937, *FRUS* Japan, Vol.1, pp 353-355

<sup>267</sup> *Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen (Nanking) to Foreign Office*, 16 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 247 & *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 16 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 419-420

<sup>268</sup> Lee, p 37

Japanese nationals and interests.”<sup>269</sup> On the same day, Washington informed Britain that it had no desire to participate as there was no evidence that Japan would accept the proposition.<sup>270</sup> When the British urged Japan and the U.S. to reconsider, Hull informed the British Ambassador that the “State Department is somewhat embarrassed at being pressed more than once to cooperate in this scheme,” and that “should messages come from London to the effect that [the] scheme has failed because [the] United States Government refused to participate,” it might “cause recriminations to arise and would give a check to Anglo-American cooperation.”<sup>271</sup> This “somewhat querulous” response prompted Charles Orde to lament that Washington was not eager to involve itself in the difficulties in the Far East by cooperating with London.<sup>272</sup> Eden, who felt that a proposal unlikely to succeed was better than no attempt at all, sent a bitter message to Ambassador Lindsay accusing Hull of having a pessimistic outlook that contributed nothing to the situation and for falsely assuming that the multinational effort was “a scheme launched in London.”<sup>273</sup>

The failure of this initiative was indicative of the sharp contrast between pressures placed upon Washington and London. In the former, where isolationist sentiment prevailed, public pressure favoured inaction. In the latter, where internationalist sentiment had reigned through years of imperialism and global involvement, there was considerable pressure to act to minimize potential disaster. Both governments wanted to cooperate and both considered Anglo-American relations of the utmost importance but could not agree on the substance. On August 24, Hornbeck and Lindsay acknowledged the different pressures their nations faced. Hornbeck insisted that, in order to avoid embarrassing developments, London should

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<sup>269</sup> *Mr. Dodds (Tokyo) to Foreign Office*, 19 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 255

<sup>270</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Foreign Office*, 19 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 256

<sup>271</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Foreign Office*, 21 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 258-259

<sup>272</sup> Lee, p 38

<sup>273</sup> *Mr. Eden to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)*, 23 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 260

consult Washington before issuing any instructions to its representatives in the Far East if it ever hoped to pursue joint action.<sup>274</sup> Britain considered this vexingly hypocritical, but because cooperation was critical, chose to put up with American demands for the time being except when urgent action was a necessity.<sup>275</sup>

Shortly after this meeting, a situation developed that clearly demonstrated Britain's willingness to act independently when urgent action was required. The first major Anglo-Japanese incident unfolded on August 26 when Ambassador Knatchbull-Hugesson was seriously injured in an attack carried out by two Japanese aircraft. The Ambassador had been travelling from Nanking to Shanghai in a car flying the Union Jack when the vehicle was bombed and machine-gunned.<sup>276</sup> On August 27, Japan immediately, though informally, expressed its deep regret.<sup>277</sup> Eden declared that the "plea of accident" would not be accepted where the facts showed "at best negligence and a complete disregard for the sanctity of civilian life." London pressed for a formal apology, the "suitable" punishment of those responsible, and assurances that measures would be taken to prevent a recurrence.<sup>278</sup> On August 31, Dodds reported that he had reason to believe that Japan would refuse the British request on the grounds that Chiang Kai-Shek was supposed to have been on the road Knatchbull-Hugesson had been traveling. Furthermore, the Ambassador should have informed Japanese authorities of his journey. Japan even suggested that the attack had been carried out by Chinese pilots flying aircraft with Japanese markings.<sup>279</sup> Then on September 6, Japan stated that its investigations had "failed to produce any evidence to establish that the

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<sup>274</sup> *Memorandum by the Advisor on Political Relations (Hornbeck)* 24 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 464-67

<sup>275</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Mr. Eden*, 24 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 263-264

<sup>276</sup> *Mr. Eden to Mr. Dodds (Tokyo)*, 28 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 274-276

<sup>277</sup> *Mr. Eden to Mr. Dodds (Tokyo)*, 27 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 273

<sup>278</sup> *Mr. Eden to Mr. Dodds (Tokyo)*, 28 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 274-276

<sup>279</sup> *Mr. Dodds (Tokyo) to Mr. Eden*, 31 August 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 278



shooting was done by a Japanese aeroplane.” At a Cabinet meeting on September 8, Eden recommended that Craigie be withdrawn and Chamberlain suggested a note be sent to Tokyo to the effect that “apparently in matters of this kind, Japan was unable to attain to the normal standards observed among civilized peoples.” The meeting yielded no action, however, due to fears that Japan might sever relations with Britain.<sup>280</sup> After two more weeks of nearly constant pressure from Craigie, Tokyo reiterated feelings of regret and conceded a vague admission of responsibility. Though Eden remained unimpressed, Chamberlain persuaded him to accept it. On September 21, London formally announced that the incident had been resolved.<sup>281</sup>

Despite British concerns, Washington’s indisposition towards joint action was not a reflection on Anglo-American relations as much as it was a representation of America’s stance on cooperation with any foreign entity, national or multinational. On August 21, the day after Hull had disappointed Ambassador Wang with his non-committal response to China’s request to enact the Nine-Power Treaty, Hornbeck restated that the U.S. should not take the lead in invoking the Treaty. While he acknowledged that the U.S. as a signatory was compelled to participate in “full and frank communication” with the others when any one of them felt the treaty was applicable, Hornbeck suggested that the U.S. let the League take the lead with America adopting a supporting role similar to the position adopted during the Manchurian Crisis.<sup>282</sup> In Geneva, Washington designated Leland Harrison, the new Ambassador to Switzerland, as its representative. It would also be Harrison’s duty to sit on

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<sup>280</sup> *Extract from Cabinet Conclusions No. 34(37)*, 8 September 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 297-302

<sup>281</sup> *Sir R. Craigie (Tokyo) to Foreign Office*, 20 September 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 331-332 & *Sir R. Craigie (Tokyo) to Foreign Office*, 21 September 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 333

<sup>282</sup> *Memorandum by the Advisor on Political Relations*, 21 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 5-6

the League's Far Eastern Advisory Committee, the same body that had been established to handle the League's reaction to the Manchurian Crisis, should it be resurrected.<sup>283</sup>

Yet Hull worried that the League would use potential American cooperation to enlist other nations to support the cause, a scenario that could prevent Washington from acting independently when the need arose.<sup>284</sup> Believing that League member states must "make up their minds" and commit themselves to a path before a non-member was asked to do so, on September 11, Hull instructed Harrison to "refuse even to speculate with the representatives of other nations as to what decision your government will make under given conditions."<sup>285</sup> Instead, he wanted Harrison to keep in mind the tenets of Hull's statement of July 16 and August 23 as it was important to ground them as central to American foreign policy. Hull also requested that Harrison make it clear that although American policy regarding Neutrality Act application remained a day-to-day analysis, on a discreet level it was keenly interested in British and French contemplations on the subject.<sup>286</sup>

As anticipated, China officially invoked Articles 10, 11, and 17 of the Covenant on September 13 and formally appealed to the Council to advise and take action on the situation in China.<sup>287</sup> On September 16 the Council referred China's appeal to the revived Advisory Committee. Article 17 was of particular concern to Britain and the U.S. because it could necessitate the recognition of a state of war between China and Japan. Eden attempted to convince Wellington Koo, again acting as China's League delegate, not to insist upon invocation as only in the event of recognition of belligerency would it lead to restriction of

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<sup>283</sup> *Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Wilson) of a Conversation with the British Chargé (Mallet)*, 2 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 9-10

<sup>284</sup> Hull, pp 42-43

<sup>285</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in Switzerland (Harrison)*, 11 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 15-16

<sup>286</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in Switzerland (Harrison)*, 7 August 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 13-14

<sup>287</sup> *The Consul at Geneva (Bucknell) to the Secretary of State*, 13 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 17

British trade and the invocation of the American Neutrality Act, undermining China's chances against Japan. By Vansittart's estimation, this was doubly negative as China's only hope for terminating the conflict lay in its ability to resist strongly enough for Japan to decide the price was not worth the effort.<sup>288</sup>

On September 23, Harrison told Hull that the League was appointing a subcommittee to deal with the Far Eastern Crisis because the primary Advisory Committee included too many members with no direct interest in the issue.<sup>289</sup> Hull authorized Harrison to partake in this meeting but disagreed in principle with the smaller group as this would "detract from the broad effect and universal character of the attention merited by the presently occurring Far Eastern developments."<sup>290</sup> That Hull opposed the smaller focus group should come as no surprise given that his stated desire had always been to advocate his moral principles to as wide an audience as possible – a desire he reiterated to Harrison:

The developments ... in China are and must be the concern of every nation in the world which hopes to base its relationships ... upon the principles set forth in my statement of July 16. I can see no reason why any and all nations could not take a position with regard to this conflict from the point of view of their own interest in the preservation of peace and the settlement of disputes by peaceful methods.<sup>291</sup>

On September 28, Hull instructed Harrison to keep in mind that although Washington opposed joint action with other powers, it had already taken a number of steps toward the cessation of hostilities: it had made appeals to both Japan and China to stop fighting, had made an offer of good offices, and had publicly protested Japan's aerial bombing of non-combatants. Hull commented that "spontaneous separate action" between two or more

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<sup>288</sup> *The Consul at Geneva (Bucknell) to the Secretary of State*, 16 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 17

<sup>289</sup> *The Minister in Switzerland (Harrison) to the Secretary of State*, 23 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 29

<sup>290</sup> Hull, p 543

<sup>291</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in Switzerland (Harrison)*, 24 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 32-34

powers “is more strongly indicative of feeling ... and more likely to serve effectively,” than any joint action. The Secretary opined that as Washington had already done its part, other governments needed to do theirs for:

... this government has gone further in the field of efforts calculated to support the general principles of world peace and security and toward indicating disapprobation and disapproval of disregard thereof than has any other nation or group of nations. We therefore feel that efforts of other nations might well be directed now towards going as far as or farther than we have thus far gone along those lines.<sup>292</sup>

Hull’s instructions to Harrison over the course of League deliberations indicate a limited approach to American foreign policy. There can be little doubt that he wanted his oft-reiterated principles of July 16 to fundamentally change the way that international relations were undertaken. But by steadfastly refusing to relinquish the moral high ground, Hull fell into the same trap as Stimson had, advocating a moral standard yet failing to contribute to the effective resolution of more immediate problems and thus failing to live up to that high morality. Certainly Hull was constrained by the isolationism prevalent in domestic opinion. He did not, however, take advantage of issues which would have afforded him the opportunity to devise a more assertive policy in Asia. In particular, America’s obligations under the Nine-Power Treaty provided an excellent chance to take a firm stance toward Japan. However, instead of cooperating with Britain, Hull opted to placate the isolationists.

By early September Britain was increasingly irritated with America’s unwillingness to cooperate in Asia. There was widespread feeling in London that Britain should “take the hint and in the future act independently.”<sup>293</sup> As the Far Eastern Department pointed out, “it

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<sup>292</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in Switzerland (Harrison)*, 28 September 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 42-44

<sup>293</sup> *Pratt to the Foreign Office*, 1 September 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 378

is clear that this U.S. attitude will not be altered by talking and we shall have to accept it. We can obviously not rely on American cooperation so we must go ahead under our own steam.”

In Tokyo, Craigie added that “any further initiative on our part to secure such cooperation will in present circumstances tend to diminish [the] influence which we can exercise here on our own without any corresponding advantage to our relations with [the] United States.”

Eden was the only British policy maker who remained convinced that joint Anglo-American action remained possible. In his diary, Grew reflected on the juxtaposition of the current situation with that of 1931:

Humorists might find humor in the complete turning of the tables between 1931 and 1937. Then it was we who stepped out in front and the British would not follow. Now it is the British who are taking the lead while we are moving slowly ... the logic of it is perfectly clear. British material interests were not acutely affected by the Manchurian issue. But the farther south Japanese aggression extends, the more closely are British material interests touched. There's not much sentiment or ethical principle involved in international action nowadays, if there ever was. It's generally a matter of dollars and cents....<sup>294</sup>

Fortunately for the frustrated British, while America continued cautiously, there remained in Washington an understanding that isolationist sentiment unwittingly pandered to aggressor states freely violating international law, secure in the knowledge that they could avoid effective punishment. In September, Hull and Davis agreed that Roosevelt should make a speech on international cooperation, ideally in a large city where isolationism was entrenched.<sup>295</sup> Roosevelt recognized the opportunity for America to publicly express indignation with Japan's actions as well as those of Germany and Italy.<sup>296</sup> On September 14, he met with Ickes to go over the details of his speech. According to Ickes' diary, he and the President agreed that Roosevelt's “was the only voice in the world that could effectively be

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<sup>294</sup> Lee, pp 45-46

<sup>295</sup> Hull, p 544

<sup>296</sup> Dallek, pp 147-148

raised in defense of [democracy].” During a discussion in which he likened Italy, Germany and Japan to a contagious disease, Ickes gave the President the notion that “neighbours had a right to quarantine themselves against a contagious disease.” According to Ickes, Roosevelt felt he “would have to take the ball away from Hull”, perhaps because recognizing that the righteousness of Hull’s policies had proven ineffective as a deterrent to aggressor nations.<sup>297</sup>

On October 5, Roosevelt gave his famous ‘Quarantine of Aggressors’ speech in Chicago. He began with the observation that “the present reign of terror and international lawlessness... has now reached a stage where the very foundations of civilization are seriously threatened.” Declaring that isolation and neutrality afforded no escape and that international anarchy jeopardized the security of every nation, large or small, he warned that no one should imagine that America would escape from this or that the Western Hemisphere would not be attacked. “War” he said:

... is a contagion, whether it be declared or undeclared. It engulfs states and peoples remote from the original scene of hostilities. We are determined to keep out of war, yet we cannot insure ourselves against the disastrous effects of war and the danger of involvement. We are adopting such measures as will minimize our risk of involvement, but we cannot have complete protection in a world of disorder in which confidence and security have broken down.

Roosevelt concluded by underlining the overriding goal of his foreign policy: “America hates war. America hopes for peace. Therefore, America actively engages in the search for peace.”<sup>298</sup> According to Welles, the President had urged precisely what he had been mulling over during the previous summer when they had discussed blockading Japan: “The ostracism by any community of an evil-doer implies that he will be cut off from all communication unless he is willing to reform. The free, decent and peaceful members of the family of nations had to decide, as the President put it, ‘whether our civilization is to be dragged into

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<sup>297</sup> Ickes, pp 221-222

<sup>298</sup> *Address Delivered by President Roosevelt at Chicago, 5 October 1937, Peace and War*, pp 383-387

the tragic vortex of unending militarism punctuated by periodic wars, or whether we shall be able to maintain the ideal of peace, individuality and civilization as the fabric of our lives.’”<sup>299</sup>

As Jonathan Utley has pointed out, “Roosevelt’s speech did everything Hull had sought to avoid. It exacerbated Japanese-American relations by engaging in name-calling, it pushed the United States into a leadership role among the Western Nations, and it made a League-sponsored conference of the Nine-Power Treaty signatories inevitable.”<sup>300</sup> While Welles applauded the speech, calling it “something you could really sink your teeth into,” he lamented that only a few within the Cabinet expressed support.<sup>301</sup> Hull was particularly critical, noting that the reaction against it, especially the concept of a ‘quarantine,’ was quick and violent. He perceived that the speech had set back his campaign of gradually educating the public towards international cooperation by a good six months. Six major pacifist organizations jointly declared that Roosevelt was leading the American people down the path to war.<sup>302</sup> Senator Borah likened the idea of boycotting Japanese goods to “fooling with dynamite,” while Senator Nye told newsmen that he feared “the call is upon America to police a world that chooses to follow insane leaders.” Senator Hiram Johnson proclaimed that “the President with his delusions of grandeur sees himself the saviour of mankind.”<sup>303</sup> The President scrambled to clarify some of the speech’s more controversial aspects. In a conversation with Cardinal Mundelein, he explained that the term ‘quarantine’ did not involve sanctions or military action against aggressor states. Instead, it implied a policy of isolation whereby neutral governments would unilaterally sever communications with the

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<sup>299</sup> Welles, p 82

<sup>300</sup> Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p 16

<sup>301</sup> O’Sullivan, p 23

<sup>302</sup> Hull, p 545

<sup>303</sup> Cole, pp 246-247

aggressor state. When a news correspondent claimed that the foreign press had called the speech “an attitude without a program,” Roosevelt retorted “it is an attitude and it does not outline a program, but it says we are looking for a program.”<sup>304</sup>

On October 6, the League of Nations Assembly adopted and published two reports concluding that Japan’s military operations against China were out of all proportion to the incident that had occasioned the conflict. Moreover, the League could not facilitate friendly cooperation between the two nations despite Japan’s claims to the contrary.<sup>305</sup> Harrison cabled that some nations, notably Canada and Switzerland, had been influenced to vote in favour of adoption thanks to Roosevelt’s Quarantine Speech. Upon adopting the report, the Assembly President invited the Nine-Power Treaty signatories to begin consultations under Article VII as soon as possible.<sup>306</sup> Taking a stance that he had avoided since July, Hull said that America supported the Assembly’s conclusion that Japan bore culpability for events in the Far East because its actions contradicted the Nine-Power Treaty and Kellogg-Briand Pact.<sup>307</sup>

Despite American recognition of League conclusions, obstacles remained to successful consultations among Western Powers. Wary of isolationist disapproval, Roosevelt’s administration still sought to limit involvement by avoiding a position in which international policies would be shared by multiple nations. When the British Embassy sought its opinion about how the Nine-Power Treaty signatories might meet to discuss Japan’s breach of terms and specifically whether the United States would host such a

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<sup>304</sup> Borg, pp 381-386

<sup>305</sup> Hull, p 544

<sup>306</sup> *The Minister in Switzerland (Harrison) to the Secretary of State*, 6 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 61

<sup>307</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Minister in Switzerland (Harrison)*, 6 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 62-63



meeting, the State Department distanced itself,<sup>308</sup> U.S. officials suggested that those signatories who were also League members should initiate the conference, and that it should take place outside America whereupon the U.S. would involve itself as it saw fit.<sup>309</sup>

There were other problems opposing successful consultations. Japanese officials declared on October 6 that the Nine-Power Treaty was obsolete and that the Kellogg-Briand Pact did not apply to the crisis in China. Japan also intimated that it would not attend a Nine-Power conference nor would it accept any third party intervention between itself and China,<sup>310</sup> assertions which raised serious doubts about the conference's value since any improvement in the situation was dependent upon China and Japan reaching an understanding.

Nevertheless, planners pushed ahead. Britain initially proposed that the conference be held in Washington where the Nine-Power Treaty had been signed in 1922. The U.S. suggested a smaller European city but not Geneva or the capital of any major power.<sup>311</sup> Britain approached Belgium which agreed to host with the notation that it was doing so "at the request of the American and British Governments."<sup>312</sup> Washington accepted the proposed caveat after rewording it to state that Belgium was hosting the conference "at the request of the British Government and with the approval of the American Government,"<sup>313</sup> a change that emphasized the State Department's preoccupation with avoiding any impression

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<sup>308</sup> *Mr. Eden to Mr. Mallet (Washington)*, 6 October 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 374

<sup>309</sup> *The British Embassy to the Department of State*, 6 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 64 and *The Department of State to the British Embassy*, 7 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 65-66

<sup>310</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 8 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 66-67

<sup>311</sup> *The British Embassy to the Department of State*, 6 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 64 & *The Department of State to the British Embassy*, 7 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 65-66

<sup>312</sup> *The Chargé in the United Kingdom (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 9 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 70-71 & *Chargé in the United Kingdom (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 15 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 79-80

<sup>313</sup> *Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Wilson) of a Trans-Atlantic Telephone Conversation with the Chargé in the United Kingdom (Johnson)*, 15 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 81-82

that U.S. policy was closely linked to that of Britain or that Washington was following London's lead.

On October 16, Belgium officially invited the signatories of the Nine-Power Treaty to "examine the situation in the Far East and to study peaceable means of hastening the end of the regrettable conflict which prevails there." Washington quickly accepted the invitation and selected Anglophile Norman Davis as its delegate, assigning him two advisors, Stanley Hornbeck and Jay Pierrepont Moffat, Chief of the European Division. London's Foreign Secretary Eden had told Hull that the conference necessitated a delegation of the highest level, but Hull insisted that he could not maintain a prolonged absence from Washington as Congress would be assembling at that time.<sup>314</sup> Washington remained keen on avoiding any impression of total commitment to a League-orchestrated action and Hull's presence, appropriate as it might have been, could be construed as such.

As the conference drew close, State Department opinions were divided along two lines. The first side believed that if Japan was not stopped, it would conquer China, seize Western possessions in the Pacific, and eventually attack the Philippines, thus leading to war with the U.S. The second believed that not only would Japan's efforts to conquer China prove futile, Japan would find that the U.S. was too valuable a trading partner and too secure geographically to threaten. Hornbeck, in the first camp and a fervent believer in America's need to directly involve itself in international affairs, maintained that "it was the duty of all members of the community to endeavour to prevent breaches of the peace" with concrete pressures. In an October 6 memorandum, he noted that Conference powers should devote themselves firstly to adopting restrictive measures against Japan and secondly to considering measures which could contribute to stability in the Far East, comparable to those of the

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<sup>314</sup> Hull, pp 550-552

Washington Conference. On October 7, he noted, “If we mean business and if we intend to be realistic, we must consider earnestly whether we are willing to do anything beyond and further than express opinions.”<sup>315</sup> Hornbeck’s selection as one of Davis’ advisors reflected the internationalist leanings within the upper echelons of the Roosevelt administration.

These leanings were tempered, however, by personal biases which had a strong influence on America’s international dealings. Several senior State Department officials, Sumner Welles among them, were staunch Anglophobes. As an advisor to Davis, Moffat did little to hide his distaste of Britain’s policies. He was doubtlessly included in the American delegation as a counterweight to Davis who strongly favoured closer relations with Britain. Writing in his diary on October 6, Moffat expressed his belief that U.S. Far Eastern policy was putting America in the same awkward position that Britain had occupied when Italy had invaded Ethiopia. America was being set up to bear the brunt of any conflict that might erupt in the Pacific, and that “once again, Great Britain would have somebody to fight her battles for her.”<sup>316</sup> On October 7, Moffat firmly acknowledged that he and Davis wanted American policy to go in “considerably” different directions.<sup>317</sup> Moffat’s selection as an advisor to Davis further emphasizes that the State Department was not a uniform entity working towards a singular purpose – it included numerous distinct personas, each with different opinions on how the Administration should direct America on the international stage.

On October 18, Hull met with Davis to discuss his Conference role as envisioned by the State Department:

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<sup>315</sup> Borg, pp 401-403

<sup>316</sup> Moffat, Jay P. *The Moffat Papers*, 6 October 1937, p 154

<sup>317</sup> Moffat, 7 October 1937, p 155

You will bear in mind that the first objective of the foreign policy of this country is national security, and that consequently we seek to keep peace and to promote the maintenance of peace; that we believe in cooperative effort for the preservation of peace by pacific and practicable means; and that this country has as a signatory of the Pact of Paris of 1928 renounced war as an instrument of national policy and pledged itself to resort for settlement of disputes to none but pacific means. You will bear in mind also that public opinion in the United States has expressed its emphatic determination that the United States keep out of War.<sup>318</sup>

Davis was also to consider that Hull's statements of July 16 remained the essential principles underlying the State Department's approach to the Far East. Hull insisted that the conference be viewed as "a forum for constructive discussion, to formulate and suggest possible bases of settlement, and to endeavour to bring the parties together through peaceful negotiation."

These instructions reflected the State Department's resigned belief that the U.S. lacked any real alternative to consultation. Japan had already stated it would not attend any Nine-Power conference, negating any hope of discussion between itself and China. Hull emphasized consultation because it seemed unlikely the conference could amount to much else. However, while Hull believed that the U.S. must avoid force and should use the conference to trumpet his July 16 statement, Roosevelt devised a further American objective while agreeing that the conference provided prime opportunity for consultation. In meetings with Davis and Hull, the President argued that if the U.S. was to avoid a clash with Japan, a practical means must be found to check Japan's occupation, acknowledging on October 12 that the crisis would only worsen if Japan and China could not agree soon. If the Brussels Conference was unsuccessful in producing a practical solution, Roosevelt believed the U.S. should be ready to use force as Britain and other League Powers could not be expected to act without U.S. naval support. When Hull insisted that the American public would never

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<sup>318</sup> *Hull to Davis*, 18 October 1937, Norman H. Davis Papers [NHD], Box 4, File 1, LOC

support this, Roosevelt proclaimed that the people would likely demand action if Japan continued its conquest of China.<sup>319</sup>

Aware of Japan's reluctance to attend, Roosevelt suggested a strategy of repeatedly urging reconsideration, stressing the application of moral force but prolonging the conference for as long as possible as "an agency for educating public opinion and bringing to bear upon Japan all possible moral pressure."<sup>320</sup> Realizing the difficulties the conference would encounter without Japan's attendance and given the reaction to his Chicago speech, the President hoped that American public opinion might be swayed towards internationalism. On October 19, he insisted that sanctions remain a last resort to be discussed only when efforts towards mediation were exhausted. He suggested that if Japan failed to attend, it would further ostracize itself from the international community, making it easier for Britain and the U.S. to jointly impose sanctions against it, qualifying this by insisting that cooperation had to be equal and supported by international sentiment as the U.S. could not be seen as applying force independently.<sup>321</sup>

Roosevelt's concern that the League would push the United States into a leadership role prompted him to dictate a memorandum as a guide for his delegation's dealings with the British. He told Davis to make it clear to Britain that "there is such a thing as public opinion in the United States, as well as in other nations," that the U.S. would not cooperate with the League in joint action against Japan, and that it would not be "pushed out in front as the leader in, or suggestor of, future action." To avoid the perception the U.S. was acting as "a tail to the British kite," Roosevelt stated that it was "especially important" that the British government understand his administration's vision of the conference:

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<sup>319</sup> *Memorandum of Conversations between Roosevelt and Davis*, 20 October 1937, NHD, Box 4, File 2, LOC

<sup>320</sup> Hull, p 552

<sup>321</sup> Borg, pp 405-407

In the present Far Eastern situation it is visualized that whatever proposals are advanced at Brussels and whatever action comes out of Brussels, the proposals and the action should represent, first, the substantial unanimous opinion of the nations meeting at Brussels, and later the substantial unanimous opinion of the overwhelming majority of all nations, whether in or out of the League of Nations.<sup>322</sup>

As Dorothy Borg has pointed out, Davis' instructions "left much to be desired from the point of view of precision and clarity." As the central issue was whether or not the United States would discuss sanctions against Japan, Roosevelt's remarks were inconclusive "both in terms of the sort of sanctions he was considering and the circumstances under which he was willing to consider them." Compounding these difficulties, Davis departed before meeting with either Hull or Welles who was to serve as Acting Secretary of State at the Conference. Davis and his advisors left for Brussels under the impression that the U.S. was prepared to stand firm against Japan, while Washington gave no indication that this was indeed its understanding of the situation.<sup>323</sup>

In Britain, Conference preparatory work became fixated on determining the likely U.S. course of action. As European concerns prevented Britain from acting in the Far East without American support, London felt it had to develop an agenda based on what it predicted Washington would do. Roosevelt's Quarantine Speech had evoked mixed British feelings. Some hoped it would herald closer cooperation between the two powers while having a sobering effect on Japan, Germany and Italy. Prime Minister Chamberlain doubted the President could match the implications of his statement's opinion, noting that "It is always best and safest to count on nothing from the Americans but words." More significantly, the speech evoked apprehension that America might press for a large-scale economic boycott of Japan. Chamberlain felt that Roosevelt's quarantine analogy was

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<sup>322</sup> Roosevelt, quoted in Borg, p 407

<sup>323</sup> Borg, pp 407-408

lacking, as “patients suffering from epidemic diseases do not usually go about fully armed.” On October 6, he told his Cabinet that as sanctions could easily lead to war, he “could not imagine anything more suicidal than to pick a quarrel with Japan at the present moment when the European situation had become so serious.” Further, Roosevelt’s speech “had rather embarrassed the situation.” He emphasized that Britain should not “be manoeuvred into a position in which it could be said that the United States had offered to cooperate in economic sanctions if the United Kingdom would join them and that we were standing in the way of such action.” This would produce mutual recriminations similar to those after Britain’s alleged failure to follow Stimson’s lead in 1932, hindering future Anglo-American cooperation.<sup>324</sup>

On October 12, the British Chargé in Washington asked Welles for an “exact interpretation” of the Quarantine Speech and a response to whether the U.S. was considering a joint economic boycott, adding that British officials believed Japan would react strongly against it. The British Cabinet feared that use of the word ‘quarantine’ would invite opposition parties to interpret the quotation both as an American offer to impose economic sanctions and then as a decree that the British government was standing in the way of effective restraint against Japan.<sup>325</sup> Assuming that Eden’s inquiry suggested a belief that the speech was recommending imminent application of the “quarantine measures,” Welles responded that “this was not the case.” He further stated that America’s immediate intention was “to cooperate with the other signatories of the Nine Power Treaty for the purpose of trying to find a solution of the Chinese situation through an agreement satisfactory to all.”<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Best, pp 54-55

<sup>325</sup> *Extract From Cabinet Conclusions No. 37(37) of 13 October 1937, DBFP, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 390-394*

<sup>326</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles), 12 October 1937, FRUS 1937, Vol. 3, pp 600-602*

As the British Cabinet reviewed the possibility of economic sanctions, it came to several conclusions. First, it was impossible to place effective sanctions without risking war. Second, ineffective sanctions would not accomplish their purpose and would produce prolonged bitterness. Third, even a large number of countries imposing sanctions would not likely produce results in time to save China's possible, perhaps imminent, collapse. Lastly, there was no guarantee that Japan would not retaliate if sanctions were imposed; if so, Britain could not go to war without American support, and that support was not guaranteed. With these conclusions came inevitable questions concerning the purpose of the Conference as a whole. Anticipating that Japan might consent to some terms if treated diplomatically, Chamberlain felt the Conference should not be abandoned as it presented an opportunity to explore all avenues towards a peaceful solution. Chancellor of the Exchequer John Simon postulated that the meeting's success depended upon Japan's willingness to attend. Eden, confirming that it seemed unlikely that Japan would come, emphasized that the Quarantine Speech would play a key factor in the Conference's course of action. The Cabinet concluded that it should be made clear to the U.S. that Britain would not impose sanctions without definite assurance of support in all circumstances.<sup>327</sup>

On October 19, a British Embassy aide-mémoire outlined London's considerations to the U.S administration. Britain believed that the primary objective should be to reach a peaceful solution through negotiation, but as the task was nearly impossible given Japan's likely absence, three alternatives existed. The Conference could: (a) defer any action in the hope that the situation resolved itself; (b) express moral condemnation of Japan without taking any direct action; or (c) actively intervene in the form of assistance to China or economic sanction against Japan. As the first course effectively acquiesced to hostile action

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<sup>327</sup>*Extract From Cabinet Conclusions No. 37(37) of 13 October 1937, DBFP, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 390-394*



and the second would likely only further irritate the Japanese, the Foreign Office believed the third option was the only viable one. In the interest of going to Brussels “in full realization of the implications of course (c),” the British noted that providing assistance to China would be an onerous task logistically, and certainly not guaranteed of success. Furthermore, Japan could conceivably declare war against any state partaking in economic sanctions against it. Therefore, “no country could afford to impose effective sanctions unless it first received from the other participating countries an assurance of military support in the event of violent action from Japan.”<sup>328</sup>

The British note was not well received. The State Department informed the British Chargé d’Affaires that since the the Conference sought a peaceful agreement in the Far East, the contemplations given in point (c) did not bear enough significance to merit further discussion.<sup>329</sup> While London’s assessment was sound, Roosevelt’s administration would not support a position that could preemptively commit America to war. This reaction would seem dictated by Roosevelt’s ongoing anxiety that the U.S. would be left to “hold the bag” for Britain. Ironically, the note had originated from a British fear that the U.S. would antagonize Japan to the extent that Britain might be dragged into a war that it could not afford without American support.

On October 28, Ambassador Bingham met with Eden to discuss Britain’s attempts to understand the President’s speech. Bingham noted that the “attempt which had been made to pin the United States down to a specific statement as to how far it would go, and precisely what the President meant by his Chicago speech, was objectionable and damaging.” Eden replied that the British government had at no time taken that position, realizing that “it was

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<sup>328</sup> *The British Embassy to the Department of State*, 19 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 89-91

<sup>329</sup> *The Department of State to the British Embassy*, 19 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 92

unfair because nobody could tell in advance just what position it would be possible for the United States, or any other power, to take ....” He agreed “there would be no attempt by the British Government to attempt the lead, and no attempt whatever by the British to push the United States into such a position,” adding that it was “wise and hopeful” to at least make an effort to establish a foundation for future action.<sup>330</sup> Bingham outlined Roosevelt’s main hope that the Conference would familiarize Americans with the idea of cooperation with Britain, currently difficult since the League had so many enemies state-side. He then restated that Roosevelt had not meant economic sanctions when he had used the word ‘quarantine’.<sup>331</sup>

Britain and the United States also considered whether or not the Soviet Union and Germany should be invited to the Conference despite the fact that neither country had signed the Nine-Power Treaty. Adding the Soviet Union, which had the potential to be a powerful player in the Far East, seemed necessary because of its proximity to, and interest in, northern China. Germany was considered not only for its significant commercial investment in China, but because Britain believed that Germany, with its close ties to Japan, might offer a stabilizing presence.<sup>332</sup> In addition, despite the Anti-Comintern Pact, there remained a strong pro-Chinese faction in Germany opposing any further hostilities with China.<sup>333</sup> The U.S. agreed with Britain to invite both countries but only if the other Nine-Power signatories approved.<sup>334</sup> Though irked by its initial exclusion,<sup>334</sup> the Soviet Union decided to cooperate in

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<sup>330</sup> *The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Bingham) to the Secretary of State*, 28 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 114-116

<sup>331</sup> *Mr. Eden to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)*, 28 October 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 413-414

<sup>332</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)*, 21 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 97-98

<sup>333</sup> Borg, p 413

<sup>334</sup> *The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Belgium (Gibson)*, 21 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 99

an effort to “restrain an aggressor.”<sup>335</sup> Germany declared that it could not participate because the Conference was too closely associated with the League.<sup>336</sup> This meant that another of the world’s foremost powers would be absent, further undermining potential resolutions. In addition, the relationship between Japan and Germany was reinforced by their mutual rejection of the international community.

When Grew reported on October 21 that Japan’s Foreign Office had definitely rejected the invitation because it was the direct result of the League’s resolution and the U.S. declaration of support on October 6, Roosevelt declared it was “too late” for the U.S. to convince Japan to change its mind. Rather, he thought it better to wait until the Conference opened before informing Japan that the meeting had been organized independently of the League and that it was not connected to Hull’s October 6 statement. Welles went so far as to suggest sending Japan a note to indicate that “it is not [Washington’s] idea that the Conference should undertake to declare Japan an aggressor,” and that the U.S. conception of the Conference was only to provide opportunity for deliberation towards a peaceful settlement.<sup>337</sup>

When Japan formally rejected the invitation on October 27, it declared its actions in China to be “a measure of self-defense,” taken “in the face of China’s violent anti-Japanese policy,” and consequently “outside the purview of the Nine-Power Treaty.” It added that no fair settlement could emerge from deliberations in Brussels as the Conference was inextricably linked to the League of Nations and included “so many powers whose interests

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<sup>335</sup> *The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Davies) to the Secretary of State*, 22 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 100-101

<sup>336</sup> *The Chargé in Germany (Gilbert) to the Secretary of State*, 29 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 117-118

<sup>337</sup> *Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hamilton)*, 22 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, pp 101-102

in East Asia are of varying degrees, or who have practically no interests there at all.”<sup>338</sup> On October 31, Grew suggested that because Japan would never submit to collective mediation and that Anglo-American mediation would be even less palatable, delegates should consider electing a small committee, or even a single state, to offer its good offices for mediation if the appropriate moment revealed itself.<sup>339</sup> This advice echoed Welles’ last act as Acting Secretary of State as he had cabled a draft resolution to Davis the previous day calling upon Germany, Britain and the U.S. to be ready to act as mediators toward a peaceful settlement when the proper moment arrived.<sup>340</sup> As Dorothy Borg convincingly argued, although Welles’ draft was never submitted, it highlighted how far removed senior officials in the State Department were from those who saw the Conference as a dividing line between democracies and dictatorships. It also illustrated how, rather than considering coercive measures against Japan, the State Department was determined to be conciliatory, and that the atmosphere in Washington was altogether different from that in Brussels as delegations arrived and began exchanging preliminary views.<sup>341</sup>

When Davis arrived in Brussels, he met early with Eden in the hope that Britain and the U.S. could coordinate their endeavours. Eden had given a speech the previous week in which he implied that the most important aspect of the Conference would be to give the U.S. opportunity to step out of its isolationist shell.<sup>342</sup> Explaining that Britain felt deeply threatened by growing troubles in Europe and the Far East, Eden stated that only with Britain and the U.S. standing shoulder to shoulder could global threats be dispelled. Britain

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<sup>338</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 27 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 112-113

<sup>339</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 30 October 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 124-125

<sup>340</sup> *The Acting Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 30 October, 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 123-124

<sup>341</sup> Borg, pp 413-414

<sup>342</sup> Borg, p 414

would advance as far in the way of positive action as the U.S. but no farther, and the British government had been “playing down its willingness to assume so strong a position” because it could not judge how far America was willing to go. It would not push America to the front nor would it take the lead. Davis reiterated that the U.S. had no intention of taking the lead, that neither power should follow the other and that all nations present at the Conference should participate actively. It was not enough for only two or three states to be appointed and then have the Conference adjourn – an obvious rejection of the recent State Department initiative that Britain, America and Germany might be elected to serve as a mediating committee. While Davis decreed that he could not advocate America taking joint action, this qualification did not preclude parallel action and therefore every effort should be made to exert moral pressure. Much of the American public believed that as U.S. interests in the Far East were less extensive than those of Britain, the latter was trying to manoeuvre the U.S. into “pulling her chestnuts out of the fire for her.” He added that it appeared that if both powers provoked Japanese retaliation, the U.S. would bear the brunt, declaring that Roosevelt’s Quarantine Speech had been an effort to make clear to the American people that U.S. interests were directly affected by international anarchy.<sup>343</sup> British officials concluded that the U.S. placed great importance on the Conference as a means of educating its populace. They also reasoned that America had not decided on a firm course and would utilize the Conference to “visualise that next step,” hopefully as an advantageous one for Britain.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> *The Chairman of the American delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 2 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 145-147

<sup>344</sup> *Sir R. Clive (Brussels) to Foreign Office*, 3 November 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 2, pp 419-421

When the Conference formally opened on November 3, it did so without fanfare and with only a handful of state representatives electing to speak.<sup>345</sup> When Davis reported to Roosevelt and Hull on November 6, he noted “a far greater degree of defeatism” than he had anticipated. Meeting with French Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos, Davis learned that France had no real desire to cooperate but was present merely to secure a tripartite alignment with Britain and the U.S. While he did not favour sanctions, Delbos would support aid to China and urged a system of mutual protection for British, French and American convoys working in Chinese waters. He thought that world democracies should more directly confront dictatorships, and that President Roosevelt should organize a conference at which democracies meet to “clear up” all outstanding political problems. Davis rejected Delbos’ suggestion on the grounds that the solution to the Far Eastern crisis lay in education and moral pressure exerted by all nations, an endeavour that would benefit from the active cooperation of even smaller powers.<sup>346</sup>

Russian Minister Maxim Litvinov also favoured direct intervention, arguing that a diplomatic appeal to Japan would be wasted: however, if Britain, Russia and the U.S. cooperated in direct involvement, Japan would quickly back down.<sup>347</sup> Davis again called for cooperation between multiple states, great and small, rather than a select few. However, like the State Department, other delegations seemed to favour concentrated effort by a select few powers over a broader international approach to mediation. Davis’ meetings with other delegations demonstrated an atmosphere strongly in favour of sanctions as the means for

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<sup>345</sup> *The Chairman of the American delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 3 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 155-156

<sup>346</sup> *The Chairman of the American delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 6 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 157-159 & *The Chairman of the American delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 7 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 162-164

<sup>347</sup> Borg, pp 415-416

reigning in Japanese aggression. Initially, Davis made every effort to trumpet the line provided by Roosevelt, arguing that America was seeking a pacific alternative to sanctions. He worked to convince the others to form a sub-committee to oversee a follow-up invitation to Japan.<sup>348</sup> However, it did not take long for him to realize that the Conference would not succeed in getting Japan and China to meet, much less agree. He was convinced of the futility of his own arguments because, with the possible exception of Britain, it was clear that no other nations envisioned a non-coercive strategy in dealing with Japan. Instead, most favoured establishing a small committee to keep in touch with China and Japan while dissolving the Conference as quickly as possible.<sup>349</sup>

Further compounding Davis' discouragement was his frustration over the policies fed to him by the State Department. As policy moderates, Hull and Welles opposed any confrontation with Japan and worried that the Conference created the temptation to engage in risky, ineffectual behaviour. Welles' October 30 draft had even sought to end the conference quickly by setting up an Anglo-German-American committee to oversee the situation when it adjourned. This clearly contradicted the earlier instructions Roosevelt had delivered to Davis, leading Moffat to conclude that "Either the [President] had changed his mind, which seemed unlikely, or else the Department and the President were working at cross purposes and this should be cleared up."<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> *The Chairman of the American delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 4 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 156-157

<sup>349</sup> Borg, pp 417-418

<sup>350</sup> Moffat, 30-31 October 1937, pp 159-160

As Utley has pointed out, as it is inconceivable that Hull and Welles were unaware of Roosevelt's desire for an assertive foreign policy, it is likely that Hull sought to avoid the pitfalls that lay in the President's path.<sup>351</sup> Writing in his memoir, Hull noted:

Coercive action was not embraced within the scope of the conference. Perhaps other nations would have followed our lead if we had plumped for aggressive action, but majority public opinion in the United States would not for a moment have countenanced any such step. Action of a positive nature would have solidified the Japanese public behind the Japanese military. It might have led to reprisals by the Japanese and possibly to war ... Our only hope was to keep on good terms with Japan so that, if the right moment came, we should have the same opportunity for stepping in to end the war as Theodore Roosevelt had had in 1904 to end the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>352</sup>

However, in what reads strongly as justification for his actions, Hull failed to acknowledge that Davis did not agree with this position and that Roosevelt had not contributed to the debate since the somewhat ambiguous meetings at Hyde Park.

After concluding that Roosevelt's instructions were no longer applicable, Davis had no intention of following the State Department's "do nothing" policy. Instead, he suggested a program of far-reaching Anglo-American embargoes on arms sales to Japan, a refusal to recognize Japanese gains, a refusal to lend money to Japan for the development of conquered territories, and a joint boycott of Japanese goods. He also told the British that he hoped that Roosevelt would ask Congress to suspend the Neutrality Act as it applied to the Sino-Japanese War, claiming the President favoured action to hold totalitarian states back.<sup>353</sup> On November 10, Davis cabled Roosevelt and Hull to state that the time had come for the Conference to act because, while economic sanctions remained impractical, other options were viable. Concluding that many of the smaller delegations opposed the idea of prolonging the Conference, Davis outlined three alternative plans of action. First, the

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<sup>351</sup> Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p 19

<sup>352</sup> Hull, p 554

<sup>353</sup> Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p 20



Conference could be temporarily adjourned to allow each delegation to consult in depth with its respective government. He warned, however, that this was dangerously close to admitting failure. Second, while delegations could apply unified pressure on Japanese trade, he cautioned against this too as all nations except Britain were pushing for a U.S. lead and America therefore would take the brunt of any Japanese retaliation. The third option, the middle path as Davis saw it, involved a declaration from assembled powers to avoid any economic or political actions harmful to China, to deny Japan funds to develop conquered territories, and to give no military assistance to Japan if it attacked any member of the Conference. Davis urged Roosevelt to approach Congress with the recommendation that the Neutrality Act be repealed, hoping it would “startle and worry” Japan, possibly to the point of relenting.<sup>354</sup> Hull completely rejected all these proposals on November 12. Refusing to admit the failure of the Conference, he demanded that attendees publicly reaffirm the principles of the Nine-Power Treaty while noting the universal concern engendered by the Far Eastern conflict.<sup>355</sup>

It was not until it was approached by the British for confirmation of Davis’ proposals that the State Department learned the full extent of his private deliberations at the Conference. Suspecting Davis’s suggestions, particularly since he had made reference to possible joint fleet actions unknown to the British Ambassador, Britain wanted to confirm that his ideas were actually favoured in Washington. Welles informed the British Ambassador that it seemed unlikely that the Neutrality Act would be repealed, even in a limited fashion. As to the possibility of joint Anglo-American non-recognition

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<sup>354</sup> *The Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 10 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 175-177

<sup>355</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 12 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 180-181

commitments, “Mr. Davis had had it made clear to him that this Government was not favourably disposed to consider participation in such agreements and that Mr. Davis had been requested to submit any proposals of this character which might come up to Washington for decision before making any commitments whatever with regard thereto.” Welles then reminded the Ambassador that there was legislation authorizing the President to take part in sanctions against Japan, economic or otherwise.<sup>356</sup>

Late on November 14, Davis again cabled Roosevelt and Hull, seeking endorsement of his earlier suggestion of a joint non-recognition agreement with a declaration against private American investment in Japan’s conquered territories. As Washington had proclaimed non-recognition policies on two previous occasions, there would be no harm in participating in a resolution which affirmed them.<sup>357</sup> Roosevelt never responded. With the press reporting that Congress was hostile to action at Brussels and that the Quarantine Speech had failed to rouse the public to any great extent, Roosevelt could not readily formulate any bold new policy, especially one requiring him to overrule his Secretary of State. Hull rejected Davis’ proposal on the grounds of it being premature although it could perhaps be adopted more advantageously at a later date. He also killed proposals for a declaration against private financial investment as being outside the scope of the Conference and unfavourable with League members who were presently assembled in Geneva for a concurrent conference there.<sup>358</sup> On November 17, Davis informed Hull that he bowed to the Secretary’s judgment. He added, however, that delegation members failed to understand

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<sup>356</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles) of a Conversation with the British Ambassador (Lindsay)*, 13 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 152-155

<sup>357</sup> *The Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 14 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 185-186

<sup>358</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 15 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 187-188

how any efforts to stop the conflict could be considered “outside the terms of reference of the Conference,” that the proceedings at the Geneva gathering had no bearing on the Brussels Conference, and that the majority of Conference powers failed to believe that a reaffirmation of principles ameliorated the crisis as the situation had continued to deteriorate since the Conference had begun.<sup>359</sup>

Despite Davis’ assurance that he would stop trying to convince the State Department to adopt his proposals, Washington grew increasingly anxious. Although the Conference recessed on November 15, the American delegation’s approach continued to be criticized by an American public divided between national and international perspectives. A *New York Times* article on November 15 criticized the unwillingness of democracies to confront dictatorships.<sup>360</sup> Another on November 21 labelled the Conference a fiasco that had harmed the concept of collective security and, as an outgrowth of the President’s Quarantine Speech, constituted an American defeat.<sup>361</sup> Isolationist critics were also plentiful. On November 17, a *Chicago Tribune* article addressed to Davis, entitled “Come Home To Us Now,” argued that the Conference had avoided positive measures because of Chamberlain’s opposition. Now that it was in recess, Roosevelt had an opportunity to steer the country toward sanctions, with Davis better off leaving Brussels altogether.<sup>362</sup>

Unable to please either side, Hull instructed Davis to do what he could to address press reports creating the image that the United States was responsible for the refusal of other powers to deal with Japan. He hoped that Davis could counteract what he believed was a general effort by Brussels representatives to put the entire responsibility for action

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<sup>359</sup> *The Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis) to the Secretary of State*, 17 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 200-202

<sup>360</sup> Birchall, Frederick, “Censure of Japan to be Voted Today,” 15 November 1937, *New York Times*, p 2

<sup>361</sup> James, Edwin, “Brussels Conference in Bathetic Impotence,” 21 November 1937, *New York Times*, p 3

<sup>362</sup> Borg, pp 431-432

upon Washington despite an unwillingness to act themselves. Noting that the British and French Embassies were making no effort to correct these impressions, Hull had “reason to believe that in one capital at least they have endeavoured to convey the impression of sole responsibility of the United States in this situation.” He warned that “the temper of this country is not disposed to favour a course of more pressure or threat and ... the longer you stay in Brussels, the more the probability that you will be accused by the press of advocating such policies and trying to make them prevail at the Conference. ... it would be advisable to leave Brussels as soon as practicable....”<sup>363</sup> Hull repeated his belief that the Conference’s final session should lead to a “dramatic appeal” to the peoples of the world to uphold the principles of peace: On November 17 the State Department sent Davis a draft of the same.<sup>364</sup>

Britain, opposing any general reiteration of moral principles, favoured a declaration of policy based on non-recognition, supported by prohibition on government loans and credits and discouragement of private ones. It argued that Britain and the U.S. should together offer mediation to Japan and China but outside the framework of the Conference, pressuring Davis to extend this offer. Davis, however, pointed out that this bilateral approach was unpopular in the U.S. and that his government wanted him to return home as soon as possible.<sup>365</sup>

Eventually, the British and American delegations agreed on two separate statements to be adopted by the Conference. They would take the form of a report on the deliberations

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<sup>363</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 16 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 197-198 & *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 17 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 203-204

<sup>364</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the American Delegation (Davis)*, 16 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 197-198

<sup>365</sup> Borg, p 437

and a declaration stating that the participating governments would continue to explore all peaceful methods at arriving at a settlement, beseeching the Chinese and Japanese to end the crisis and resort to peaceful processes. The November 24 closing session saw both of these documents accepted, along with speeches by the delegations. Wellington Koo, whose impassioned speech had turned heads in Paris nearly twenty years before, declared that the Chinese delegation did not regard the Conference's conclusion as satisfactory and lamented the refusal to consider concrete proposals concerning positive aid to China and restrictive measures against Japan. Moreover, he told press correspondents that he believed that the U.S. had let China down while Britain had acted as a friend.<sup>366</sup> On that sour note, the Brussels Conference formally ended. It had accomplished little beyond destroying the last vestiges of the Nine-Power Treaty's credibility and providing further evidence that none of the Western powers, and the U.S. in particular, would risk their own security to intervene in the Far Eastern conflict.

With its hopes for multilateral support dashed, China made pleas to individual countries for assistance. With war supplies nearly exhausted, it turned first to Britain. As Britain was already supplying China with limited war materials and as was keeping Hong Kong open as a port through which other countries could deliver supplies to China, it had established itself as a sympathetic ear. Britain, however, believed it had already offered a greater commitment to China's territorial integrity than any other major power, particularly the U.S., thus satisfying its moral obligations. When China suggested that Britain should discourage credit facilities to Japan or call for a private meeting between nations interested in finding alternative methods to helping China, Britain responded that the suggestions ran counter to the resolutions adopted at the Brussels Conference calling for a solution via

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<sup>366</sup> Borg, p 438

peaceful methods. Thus, as Dr. Aron Shai neatly summarized: “at the very time that aggressive war was being waged by Japan in China, a fact that that been in principle recognised by both the League and the Brussels Conference, China was denied assistance in the name of a vague resolution which Japan did not even see fit to endorse.” The Foreign Office vaguely offered to consider a list of China’s most urgent military requirements.<sup>367</sup>

Although Whitehall limited its willingness to give further aid, the British press sympathized with the Chinese plight while organizations ranging from the clergy to unions voiced their support. With the government feeling the pressure of press scrutiny, repeated Japanese attempts to subject China to unfair terms moved Eden to publicly express sympathy for the Chinese and to question whether there was anything further Britain could do. With the Chinese army losing badly, the Foreign Office feared that Chiang Kai-shek would call for peace and resign his position. This could undermine organized resistance against Japan and present Tokyo with an opportunity to accomplish its goals, which could further reduce British strength in Asia. Compounding Britain’s difficulties, the Chinese despised Britain for its inaction, leading to a dilemma whereby even if British interests were left after Japan had attained its objectives, the Chinese might liquidate the remnants. It was clear that Japanese encroachment upon British assets was an anxiety that would not disappear. Even without rendering assistance to China, Britain needed to reevaluate its Far East stance and develop concrete measures to stop Japan from further eroding British prestige there.

Assuming that the U.S. would not cooperate, the British Admiralty feared that nothing short of total naval commitment to the Pacific with a fleet composed of all existing warships – impossible given the growing dangers of the Mediterranean – would discourage Japanese advances. Even then there was no guarantee that the fleet could stop Japanese

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<sup>367</sup> Shai, pp 112-113

infringement on British interests near Shanghai. In fact, the fleet could not even be ready for one or two more years. Within this framework, the Foreign Office resolved that Britain should not use any “threatening language or take up any strong attitude” towards Japan. Since nothing could be done militarily, Japanese advances were to be delayed with words. The bluff, however, had already been called by Japan. In addition, while Britain’s neutrality might delay the deterioration of its position in China, it could do little to repair its prestige.<sup>368</sup>

On November 24, the same day as the formal closing ceremonies of the Brussels Conference, the British Cabinet discussed developments in the Far East, agreeing that the Brussels Conference, while reaching a “somewhat inglorious” conclusion, had yielded some positive results. In particular, good relations had been maintained with the U.S., keeping the door open for future initiatives aimed at securing peace.<sup>369</sup> Shortly after the Cabinet approved a private shipment of machine guns to Japan, despite concerns the weapons might one day be turned against British subjects, the discussion turned to the question of a joint Anglo-American demonstration of force.<sup>370</sup> Eden thought Britain should again approach the U.S. about sending ships to the Far East if the British did the same. Chamberlain acknowledged that even though force would not be used with such U.S. cooperation, the Americans would still almost certainly reply that its interests were not sufficiently threatened to justify the dispatch of ships. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister did not object to the Foreign Secretary making the attempt.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Shai, p 114-119

<sup>369</sup> *Cabinet Papers at the National Archives of the United Kingdom [Cabinet Papers]*, Cabinet File. 23/90, Cabinet 43(1937) Conclusion 6, 24 November 1937

<sup>370</sup> *Cabinet Papers*, Cab. 23/90 43(37)1, 24 November 1937

<sup>371</sup> *Cabinet Papers*, Cab. 23/90 43(37)5, 24 November 1937

A draft telegram to Washington was prepared stating that in view of Japan's improper conduct, His Majesty's Government would "seriously consider increasing their naval forces in the Far East with the object of demonstrating to the Japanese Government that they are prepared in the last resort to support [their] representations by a display of force, provided that the United States Government are willing to take similar action." The draft proposed that Ambassador Lindsay enquire whether the U.S. would dispatch a "suitable number of capital ships" to Manila if British ships were sent to Singapore. Before being dispatched, however, the draft was reviewed by First Sea Lord Ernle Chatfield. He believed the proposal would necessitate the dispatch of a force large enough to almost single-handedly cope with the Japanese fleet. Furthermore, there was a risk that an uncooperative Washington "might allow it to leak out that we had made this proposal, thereby attracting against us to no purpose the fury of the Japanese Government." On Chatfield's advice, the draft was reworded "in such a way as to make it a sounding of the American Government as to their views, rather than as an indication that we were prepared to do something provided that they would follow."<sup>372</sup>

Cabling this new memo to Lindsay on November 27, Eden instructed Lindsay to determine whether the U.S. Government was:

...beginning to take as serious and anxious a view of the situation as His Majesty's Government do, and whether they feel as his Majesty's Government do that the time has come to take some steps for strengthening our hand in dealing with the Japanese. Such steps would have to be in the nature of demonstrating to the Japanese Government that our two Governments are prepared in the last resort to support representations by an overwhelming display of naval force.

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<sup>372</sup> *Extract from Cabinet Conclusions No. 43(37), 24 November 1937, DBFP, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 529-530, See Note No. 2.*



Eden indicated that the British Government was willing to enter into staff conversations to consider appropriate action.<sup>373</sup> The intent was simple: to determine what means would be at their disposal to make Britain's power felt in the Far East. Further consultation with Chatfield had determined that any fleet that Britain sent could mount a defensive posture only. U.S. involvement would allow two fleets, both of smaller size than required by either nation acting independently, to bring considerable offensive pressure. The proposed staff conversations were meant to elucidate which forces each nation could send and how cooperation could be effected.<sup>374</sup>

When Lindsay delivered the British note on November 27, he met with Welles. Reporting to Eden, the Ambassador said only that the Americans were confused as they had been under the impression that Britain could not concentrate naval forces in the Far East due to the European situation. Lindsay admitted this impression was valid but suggested that proposed staff conversations might shed further light on the situation. He closed his report on a positive note by stating that Welles thought the time had come for the two governments to frankly exchange information, but that he needed to consult with the President before giving a formal response.<sup>375</sup>

This account differs somewhat from Welles' more detailed report. The Undersecretary had been perturbed by the British use of the phrase, "by an overwhelming display of force." He remarked that only ten days earlier Britain had informed the Americans that it was not in a position to divert any considerable portion of its naval force from European waters. Over the preceding months British authorities, including Ambassador Lindsay, had explained that British policy had been "predicated upon its unwillingness to be

<sup>373</sup> *Mr. Eden to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)*, 27 November 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 543-544

<sup>374</sup> *Mr. Eden to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)*, 6 December 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 555-556

<sup>375</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Mr. Eden*, 27 November 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, p 545

drawn into a position with regard to the Japanese-Chinese controversy where the exercise of forceful measures might prove to be essential.” When the Ambassador confirmed this was a correct assessment of British policy, Welles retorted that unless London’s policy had changed, the “overwhelming display of force” would have to be an “overwhelming display of United States naval force.”<sup>376</sup>

The disparity between the two accounts highlighted the mistakes made in London in trying to understand the American position. Overly concerned that they were coming on too strong, British officials failed to appreciate that their American counterparts believed that Britain was trying to use the U.S. as a shield against Japan’s aggression: Thus, if Washington was coerced into making a move in the Far East, it would end up overcommitted to a situation which could rapidly grow into a political and logistical nightmare. By redrafting their proposal to imply that Britain was awaiting an American commitment before determining its own willingness to engage, rather than indicating their willingness to consider committing a significant portion of their fleet, the British were only reinforcing existing American fears. To be fair, while Lindsay had the misfortune of presenting the idea first to an Anglophobic Welles, it is unlikely that any member of the American Cabinet would have reacted favourably, especially so soon after the Brussels Conference at which the U.S. had nixed any joint naval action.

Undoubtedly hoping for a more satisfactory result, Lindsay met with Hull on November 29 to discuss again Britain’s proposal for staff talks. The Ambassador, noting the Secretary of State was “more than usually difficult to understand,” nevertheless discerned that Hull was trying to stress several points. Hull insisted that absolute secrecy was essential since any leak about staff conversations or secret treaties would make dealing with Congress

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<sup>376</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)*, 27 November 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 724-715

and the isolationists difficult and render Washington's capacity to conduct foreign policy even more remote. The American administration, attempting to educate its public on a broader view and the need for patience, felt that British officials were advancing too quickly with talk of staff conversations. While Hull did not explicitly decline the invitation for staff talks, Lindsay had no doubt there was little interest. This was confirmed at a second meeting with Welles on November 30 when he explained that talks were undesirable as the "State Department [does] not take quite so pessimistic a view of Japanese intentions as you do."<sup>377</sup>

The American rejection brought the issue of Far East cooperation to a standstill. On December 2, Chiang Kai-Shek told German officials that he was prepared to discuss possible peace terms with Japan. This development, plus Craigie's continued insistence that Japan would be receptive to a suggestion from Anglo-American good offices, prompted the British to approach the Americans on December 8 with the proposal that the two act as intermediaries for the two sides. Once again Welles was unmoved, pointing out that Japan was unlikely to be receptive to Anglo-American mediation. As Ambassador Grew had "indicated plainly that he felt it would be inadmissible for the two government to transmit peace proposals which were in any way counter to the provisions of the Nine Power Treaty," Welles felt it was "inconceivable that either the British Government or the United States Government would be willing to act as intermediaries in the reaching of a peace between China and Japan of a character contrary to the principles embodied in the Nine Power Treaty."<sup>378</sup> The British grudgingly agreed and dropped the subject.<sup>379</sup> Even as conversations concerning their partnership declined, however, startling new events affecting both countries

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<sup>377</sup> *Sir. R. Lindsay (Washington) to Mr. Eden*, 30 November 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 548-550

<sup>378</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)*, 8 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 775-777

<sup>379</sup> Lee, p 86

were about to unfold in China, dramatically altering the landscape of Anglo-American cooperation.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PANAY

Since 1854, the United States Navy had maintained a presence on the Yangtze River, a right earned by way of the “Unequal Treaties” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the early 1900’s, it had established a considerable commercial operation there, with the Standard Oil Company maintaining several vessels in the waters around Nanking. As commerce necessitated more pronounced security, the U.S. Navy developed a number of specially built, shallow-draft gunboats to operate in Chinese waters. Between 1926 and 1927, six new gunboats were commissioned to fill out the Yangtze Patrol: The 210-foot *USS Luzon* and *USS Mindanao*, the 191-foot *USS Panay* and *USS Oahu*, and the 169-foot *USS Guam* and *USS Tutuila*. Each of the vessels carried only a small compliment of sailors: the *Panay* had just four officers and forty-nine enlisted men. Resembling Mississippi riverboats more than combat vessels, each ship was lightly armed with machine guns and other small calibre weapons appropriate for river defense and patrol missions but quite ill-suited to meet the dangers of the full-scale war which descended upon Nanking in 1937.<sup>380</sup>

By late November the conflict had arrived at the outskirts of Nanking, prompting the Chinese Foreign Minister to leave the city. As the Minister had politely suggested that all foreign dignitaries follow suit, the American Ambassador and a large part of the American Embassy boarded the flagship of the Yangtze Patrol, the *Luzon*, on November 22. Several Embassy personnel, including Second Secretary George Atcheson Jr. and Vice Consul J. Hall Paxton, stayed behind to provide assistance to Americans who, despite the urgings of their government, remained behind. To maintain communications between Embassy personnel and the State Department, the *Panay* stayed at Nanking as a last means of escape

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<sup>380</sup> *U.S.S. Panay Memorial Website*, <http://www.usspanay.org/index.shtml>

from the city if necessary. As he left, Ambassador Johnson informed the Japanese Ambassador in Shanghai that while much of the American Embassy staff had left Nanking, the office continued to function. He requested that “the Japanese military and civil authorities take note of the circumstances ... and should necessity arise accord full recognition to the diplomatic status of the Embassy personnel and premises and give them appropriate facilities and full protection.”<sup>381</sup>

By December, most British officials remaining in Nanking slept on board a merchant ship upriver, protected by British gunboats. American personnel temporarily remained ashore due to the relatively small size of the *Panay*. On December 7, Acheson reported to the State Department that everything possible had been done for Americans remaining in Nanking and that American property within the city had been identified as clearly as possible. The following day, as Japan’s military forces came within twenty miles of the city, the remaining British and American officials boarded their respective vessels; as such, the *Panay* became a temporary office of the American Embassy. By that time, the officer in charge of the Italian Embassy and other Italian personnel had been granted permission to board as well. On December 9, Acheson, advising the Japanese that eighteen Americans planned on remaining in Nanking indefinitely, requested that the Japanese provide, in case of need, “appropriate protection and facilities” to these Americans. Shortly thereafter, Nanking’s waterfront area was heavily bombed, forcing the remaining Embassy personnel to board the *Panay* along with several foreign nationals, newspaper correspondents, and a premier cameramen for Universal News, Norman Alley.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> *Summary of the Events at Nanking Between November 21 and December 10, 1937, FRUS Japan: 1931-1941, Vol. 1, pp 517-519*

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid*

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, with artillery fire falling nearby, the *Panay* formed a convoy with three Standard Oil tankers, the *SS Mieping*, *SS Meishia*, and *SS Meian*, and moved some 12 miles upriver from Nanking. As with previous location changes, Atcheson telegraphed the Consul General at Shanghai to inform the Japanese Embassy of the vessel's whereabouts. As Japanese shellfire forced the convoy to continue moving, Atcheson reported that hostile artillery fire was being adjusted so that shells continually fell near the moving vessels,<sup>383</sup> compelling the *Panay* and its entourage to anchor about 27 miles above Nanking.<sup>384</sup> Grew, also advised of the manoeuvring, called upon Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hirota, to request that all necessary measures be taken to prevent Japanese shells from dropping near the *Panay* and the Standard Oil ships. Hirota responded that the Japanese military had already warned foreign nationals to evacuate the area around Nanking. Grew then pointed out the "deplorable and serious effect which would be caused in the United States if the shells falling in the vicinity of these vessels should cause injury to Americans." His warning went unheeded as artillery fire continued to endanger the *Panay* and its passengers.<sup>385</sup>

On the morning of December 12, Washington received news that the HMS *Ladybird* had been struck by four shells, killing one seaman and wounding several others. The HMS *Bee* also had come under fire although it had not been hit.<sup>386</sup> It reported that there had been a series of aerial attacks against the HMS *Cricket* and HMS *Scarab*, hitting one merchant vessel, and that the British ships had returned fire against the attacking planes.<sup>387</sup> The

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<sup>383</sup> *The Second Secretary of Embassy in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State*, 21 December 1937, *FRUS Japan: 1931-1941*, Vol. 1, pp 532-541

<sup>384</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 12 December 1937, *FRUS 1937*, Vol. 4, pp 486-487

<sup>385</sup> Grew pp 232-234

<sup>386</sup> *From Comyangpat to CINCAF*, 12 December 1937, McJimsey, George ed. *Documentary History of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidency* (LexisNexis, 2006) Vol. 29

<sup>387</sup> *Telegram from COMYANGPAT*, 12 December 1937, State Department Records, RG 59, Microfilm Reel M976, 46, Relating to the Political Relations between China and Japan, 1930-1946, NARA

attacks seemed intentionally directed toward British vessels. Uneasiness increased when the commander of the Yangtze Patrol, Edward J. Marquart, told Washington that he had been unable to contact the *Panay* that morning.<sup>388</sup> Johnson passed along further ominous news, informing Hull that his sources indicated that Japanese forces had received orders to fire upon all ships on the river.<sup>389</sup>

Given the confusion created by war and distance, the exact events of December 12 were not immediately clear in Washington. Shortly after 10:00 pm, Marquart informed Admiral Yarnell that he had received a telephone call apprising him that the *Panay* had been bombed and sunk and that 54 survivors, including many badly wounded, had gone ashore at Hoshein.<sup>390</sup> Details became less murky when Atcheson finally contacted Johnson directly, noting that after coming under fire that morning by distant artillery, the *Panay* had moved further upstream where it was signalled by a Japanese military unit on shore. An armed motor boat carrying Japanese soldiers pulled alongside the *Panay* and boarded it.<sup>391</sup> The Americans were questioned regarding their purpose on the river and the disposition of Chinese forces. According to Alley, Commander Hughes, taking umbrage at the interruption, replied curtly “This is an American naval vessel. The United States is friendly to Japan and China alike. We do not give military information to either side.” The Japanese soldiers then departed without further incident.<sup>392</sup>

At 11:00 a.m., Atcheson sent a priority message to the Consul General at Shanghai, again requesting that the Japanese Embassy be informed of the *Panay*'s location. Records

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<sup>388</sup> *From Johnson to CINCAF*, 12 December 1937, McJimsey, *Documentary History of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidency*, Vol. 29

<sup>389</sup> *The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 12 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, p 488

<sup>390</sup> *Commander Yangtze Patrol to CIC Asiatic Fleet*, 12 December 1937, PSF, DC, Box 26 China 1937, FDRL

<sup>391</sup> *The Second Secretary of Embassy in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State*, 21 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-1941, Vol. 1, pp 532-541

<sup>392</sup> *U.S.S. Panay Memorial Website*, <http://www.usspanay.org/attacked.shtml>



indicate that this message was received by 12:15, that the Consul General immediately telephoned the Japanese Embassy while simultaneously sending a handwritten letter which was received by the Japanese before 1:00 p.m.<sup>393</sup> Shortly after 1:30, the *Panay* was bombed and sunk by Japanese aircraft, along with the entire convoy of Standard Oil transports that it had been escorting, each carrying additional Nanking refugees.<sup>394</sup> The day was sunny and clear, making clearly visible the American flags prominently displayed on the American vessels. Six Japanese aircraft attacked the *Panay* with roughly twenty 100-lb bombs, dropping them from a height of no more than 1000 feet and scoring four or five direct hits. The planes also strafed the *Panay* as its crew returned fire from the ship's deck-mounted machine guns. The order to abandon ship was given at approximately 2:05 pm, with the entire attack having lasted a mere thirty minutes.<sup>395</sup>

As the crew fled the sinking vessel, Japanese aircraft machine-gunned the small boat ferrying survivors to shore. Two armed Japanese motorboats came downriver and machine-gunned the abandoned ship, apparently directing their attacks at the bridge. Japanese soldiers were seen boarding the ship where they remained for several minutes, presumably searching for survivors who were well concealed, however, in the marsh lining the river. At one point, Japanese planes circled their hiding area, leading the survivors to believe the Japanese intended to eliminate anyone witnessing the attacks. The *Panay* sank shortly before 4 p.m.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> *The Second Secretary of Embassy in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State*, 21 December 1937, *FRUS Japan: 1931-1941*, Vol. 1, pp 532-541

<sup>394</sup> *State Department Press Release*, 12 December 1937, McJimsey, *Documentary History of the FDR Presidency*, Vol. 29

<sup>395</sup> *The Second Secretary of Embassy in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State*, 21 December 1937, *FRUS Japan: 1931-1941*, Vol. 1, pp 532-541

<sup>396</sup> *ibid*

While Secretary Acheson had escaped the attack unscathed, at least one sailor died and several others were seriously injured, including both of the *Panay's* senior officers. Further complicating matters, the survivors had limited capacity to move the badly wounded men. Over the course of several hours, with the help of Chinese soldiers and locals, they made their way to Hoshein, a short way upriver, where Acheson was able to contact an American missionary who relayed a message to the American Ambassador.<sup>397</sup> Upon receiving this report, Hull instructed Grew to approach Hirota for further information, to request appropriate Japanese action, and to impress upon the Japanese government the gravity of the situation.<sup>398</sup> On December 14, the survivors were picked up by the *Ladybird*, *Bee* and *Oahu*.

Writing in his memoir, Hull asserted that his first feeling upon hearing of the *Panay* bombing was that “the Japanese military had acted not only recklessly but also with an entire willingness to give us warning of their power and purpose. On the morning of December 13, Hull and the officers of the Far Eastern Division agreed that “all appearances gave Japan’s outrageous act a sinister character.” Yet America was “in no position to send sufficient naval forces to Japanese and Chinese waters to require the Japanese to make the fullest amends and resume something of a law-abiding course in the future,” especially since isolationists continued to quarrel over the subject of Roosevelt’s Quarantine Speech and demand the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the East.<sup>399</sup>

Later that morning, Hull met with Roosevelt to discuss the disaster. He lay before the President all of the State Department’s information as well as the suggestion that

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<sup>397</sup> *ibid*

<sup>398</sup> *Telegram to Tokyo*, 12 December 1937, State Department Records, RG 59, 1930-39, Box 1850, Panay, NARA

<sup>399</sup> Hull, pp 559-560

Washington emphatically demand an apology, indemnities, and punishment of the officers involved. Roosevelt dictated a memorandum, to be passed along to the Japanese

Ambassador:

1. That the President is deeply shocked and concerned by the news of indiscriminate bombing of American and other non-Chinese vessels on the Yangtze, and that he requests that the Emperor be so advised.
2. That all of the facts are being assembled and will shortly be presented to the Japanese Government.
3. That in the meantime it is hoped the Japanese Government will be considering definitely for presentation to this Government:
  - a. Full expression of regret and proffer full compensation;
  - b. Methods of guaranteeing against a repetition of any similar attack in the future.<sup>400</sup>

Ambassador Saito declared that the *Panay* attack had occurred because the Japanese had received notice of Chinese forces retreating upriver in boats, and, in a “very grave blunder,” had sent Japanese planes which had mistakenly bombed and sank the convoy. Hull retorted that his government had never been “quite so astonished at an occurrence as at the news of this promiscuous bombing of neutral vessels,” and that Washington was in the process of gathering all the facts regarding the attack. Hull sent Grew a formal message for Foreign Minister Hirota which reemphasized the three points established by Roosevelt’s memorandum.<sup>401</sup> By this time, however, the Japanese government had already given Grew a formal statement of its own, citing poor visibility as being responsible for an attack which was entirely a mistake. The government extended its sincere apologies “in the fervent hope that the friendly relations between Japan and the United States” would not be affected by the affair. Grew responded that the inability of the Japanese pilots to distinguish the nationality

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<sup>400</sup> *Memorandum by the Secretary of State*, 13 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, Vol. 1, p 522

<sup>401</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan (Grew)*, 13 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, Vol. 1, p 522-523

of the vessels did not cover the fact that, regardless of what information had been provided declaring the presence of foreign vessels near Nanking, British and American vessels had been repeatedly shelled over the course of many incidents.<sup>402</sup>

Japan made a similar statement to the British about the shelling of the *Ladybird*, indicating that it was prepared to compensate both the U.S. and Britain with appropriate indemnities and punish those found responsible in accordance with a formal investigation.<sup>403</sup> Ambassador Grew pointed out that this partial acknowledgement of responsibility, though a step in the right direction, was not fully responsive to Washington's demands, particularly concerning the request that Japan provide assurances concerning the future safety of American nationals and their interests.<sup>404</sup>

These initial exchanges between Washington and Tokyo and London and Tokyo were paralleled by Anglo-American exchanges concerning the attacks. Early on December 13, the U.S. Chargé to Britain, Johnson, contacted the State Department to report on a meeting with Eden. Eden made it clear that both he and Prime Minister Chamberlain were greatly distressed by the attacks upon the *Ladybird* and *Panay*, believed they "could not possibly have been the result of accident," and strongly favoured a cooperative response with the United States. To this end, they would send instructions to Ambassador Lindsay, hoping that Washington would abstain from further action until it had heard a British proposal for a "synchronized" effort towards Japan.<sup>405</sup> When Lindsay later met with Welles, his message expressing Britain's desire for cooperative action was more forceful than Eden's earlier

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<sup>402</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 14 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, Vol. 1, pp 524-526

<sup>403</sup> Shai, pp 124-125

<sup>404</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 14 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, Vol. 1, p 526

<sup>405</sup> *The Chargé in the United Kingdom (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 13 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 490-491

discussion with Johnson.<sup>406</sup> Stating bluntly that “action should be taken jointly otherwise it will fail to achieve an end which will in any case be difficult to attain,” Lindsay asked urgently for Washington’s views on the attacks. Welles, however, was not game. Providing only enough facts to satisfy Britain’s desire for information, he responded that it was likely that the U.S. would first demand from Japan complete and satisfactory guarantees that no such occurrences would happen in the future. There might be additional representations once all the facts had been gathered. Revealing once more his aversion to cooperation with the British, Welles did not grant the affirmation of joint action, reverting instead to the subject of possible staff conversations between the U.S. and British navies, an earlier discourse which had yet to be fully resolved.<sup>407</sup> Though Lindsay opted not to highlight the obvious link between staff talks and naval demonstrations in the Far East, Ambassador Johnson wired that evening to say that Sir Alexander Cadogan, Britain’s Deputy Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, had impressed upon him the “great importance of British and American action being at least along synchronized parallel lines if it is to have any effect on the Japanese.” Johnson also indicated that the British hoped that in light of the *Panay* incident America would consider mobilizing its fleet for action. Cadogan had hinted that if this occurred, Britain would undoubtedly increase its own Far Eastern contingent, since it did not foresee an early termination of hostilities likely moving towards the Canton area, home to many of Britain’s Chinese assets.<sup>408</sup>

The importance of these first meetings should not be understated. With both Britain and America suffering casualties in seemingly malicious attacks, an opportunity had arisen

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<sup>406</sup> Borg, p 489

<sup>407</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)*, 13 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 3, pp 798-800

<sup>408</sup> *The Chargé in the United Kingdom (Johnson) to the Secretary of State*, 13 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 494-495

which could potentially bring their Far Eastern policies into alignment against an openly aggressive Japan. However, despite Britain's urgent requests for cooperative action and the fact that both British and American ships had been targeted, Washington pursued its standard course of proceeding independently. Hull did not inform the British of the President's memo to Ambassador Sato nor did he consult with them about the State Department's formal note of protest dispatched later that day. Indeed, when Hull sent Grew the text of the message, he specifically stated, "Before seeing Hirota inform your British colleague of intended action and text but do not thereafter await action by him."<sup>409</sup> Within forty-eight hours of the attacks, the potentially magic moment of Anglo-American convergence had fizzled.

The British made no secret of their displeasure over Washington's failure to acquiesce to appeals for parallel action. On December 14, Ambassador Lindsay met with Hull to express Eden's "disappointment" over the fact that the U.S. Government had "stepped out so far ahead" of the British Government in dealing with the *Panay* incident. As a British vessel had also been attacked, Eden felt there should have been joint action in such a critical situation. More importantly, he believed that because of the danger posed by the Japanese military, a "show of possibilities of force on a large scale was necessary to arrest their attention, their movement, and their policy of firing upon citizens and warships of other countries in a most reckless, criminal and deliberate manner." Britain, while hoping to rectify the problem within the next twelve months, did not currently possess sufficient naval strength to make an adequate showing alone in Europe and in the Far East and London did not believe the U.S. could effectively apply pressure on its own either.<sup>410</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>409</sup> Borg, p 490

<sup>410</sup> *Memorandum by the Secretary of State*, 14 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 499-500

however, Hull was immune to Britain's protests, feeling that no joint action or any large scale show of force was possible given the conclusions reached by the Far Eastern Department and himself the previous morning.<sup>411</sup>

On December 15, Lindsay called again on Welles. This time he expressed his "very great concern" over a *New York Times* article written in London by foreign correspondent Ferdinand Kuhn and entitled *BRITAIN ABANDONS HOPE OF JOINT MOVE*. As the article claimed that Eden had sought to drag the U.S. into a joint naval policy which would have committed the Americans to defending British interests in the Far East,<sup>412</sup> Lindsay contended that "unless the British Government gave effective evidence of its being able to cope with the outrages being committed upon its nationals and its national interests in the Far East," many of its traditional friends in Europe would begin to wonder if they had "better not try and take care of themselves," considering closer relations with Germany and Italy. The worst of it, according to Lindsay, was that Britain would have already taken forceful measures in the Far East but was unable to do so under present conditions. For this reason, the English public and official opinion believed that a critical moment had arrived necessitating unified Anglo-American action. This, he explained, was the reason behind Eden's lamentations in his message to Hull the day before. Typically, Welles used the meeting to reiterate his own belief that concurrent or parallel action was both preferable to unified action and equally effective.<sup>413</sup> Within a few days of the *Panay* and *Ladybird* attacks,

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<sup>411</sup> Hull, pp 561

<sup>412</sup> Borg, p 490

<sup>413</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)*, 15 December 1937, *FRUS* 1937, Vol. 4, pp 503-505

British officials stopped prodding Washington for joint action as further efforts would do more harm than good.<sup>414</sup>

As additional reports came in, Washington expressed its dismay to the Japanese government. The most important of these reports were the investigations by Admiral Yarnell (ultimately taken over by a special U.S. Naval Court of Inquiry) and the preliminary report wired by Acheson on December 17. When it was learned that Japanese planes had machine-gunned the American survivors and that motorboats had similarly assaulted the sinking *Panay* despite a clearly visible American ensign, Hull sent an additional note to Tokyo. “These reports,” he said, “give very definite indication of deliberateness of intent on the part of the Japanese armed forces which made the attack.” Despite the damning evidence, Tokyo maintained the entire incident had been an unfortunate error, a position that Hull deemed the “lamest of lame excuses.” He noted that it was indeed possible that Japan’s Foreign Office had had no hand in it and acknowledged that Hirota seemed sincerely regretful. It also appeared that the Japanese populace was not pleased for the American Embassy had received “thousands” of expressions-of-regret contributions for the families of the victims. However, to suggest that Japanese military leaders, at least those in China, had no hand in the matter seemed ludicrous. At the very least, it was their job to keep their subordinates under control. Hull also noted that there “was ample evidence that the Government of Japan became committed to, and gave full support to, the course pursued by the Japanese military practically from the outbreak of fighting in July 1937.”<sup>415</sup>

On December 17, Ambassador Grew told Hull that during a meeting with Hirota he had expressed in “the strongest possible way,” that the “seriousness of the facts presented”

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<sup>414</sup> Borg, p 491

<sup>415</sup> Hull, p 562



tended to disprove the allegation the *Panay* bombing had been a mistake. Grew pointed out that evidence showed both Japanese naval and military forces were obviously guilty of deliberate attack against ships clearly flying American colours. A visibly upset Hirota pleaded ignorance and argued that he was totally unaware of the facts Grew was presenting, needing to take up the matter with naval and military authorities.<sup>416</sup> Compounding the evidence, foreign correspondents remaining in Nanking were beginning to report on atrocities there. A dispatch sent by Tillman Durdin to the *New York Times* recounted in graphic detail the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers:

The killing of civilians was widespread. Foreigners who traveled widely through the city Wednesday found civilian dead on every street. Some of the victims were aged men, women and children.... Many victims were bayoneted and some of the wounds were barbarously cruel... the writer watched the execution of 200 men on the Bund. The killings took ten minutes. The men were lined against a wall and shot ... Japanese, armed with pistols, trod nonchalantly about the crumpled bodies pumping bullets into any that were still kicking ... A large group of military spectators apparently greatly enjoyed the spectacle.<sup>417</sup>

Predictably, this news magnified tension in America which had already reached a new high point following the *Panay* incident and compelled Roosevelt to take full stock of his options. He had two: economic recourse or direct naval retaliation. On December 14, Roosevelt told Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau that despite the fact that the sinking of a naval vessel could no longer be considered an automatic declaration of war, he wanted to know if he had the authority to seize all Japanese assets in the U.S. as payment for damages done by Japan. Moreover, he wanted to know what could be done to him if he proceeded with such a plan without formal authority. Morgenthau consulted the Treasury's General

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<sup>416</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 17 December 1937, *FRUS Japan 1931-1941*, Vol. 1, pp 528-529

<sup>417</sup> "Butchery Marked Capture of Nanking," 18 December 1937, *New York Times*, p 1

Counsel, Herman Oliphant, who prepared a memorandum which he presented to Roosevelt on December 15. Oliphant explained that under the auspices of the 1933 amendment to the Trading with the Enemy Act, the President was authorized to find a state of national emergency existing if, for example, actions became necessary to forestall events which might plunge the nation into war, to quarantine a war which endangered the U.S., or to assure reparation in order to avoid resorting to force. Upon such a declaration, the President could prohibit transactions in foreign exchange, stop the withdrawal of bank credits, and ban the export of gold by the Japanese government. The issue of private ownership could not be easily discerned, however, and needed to be examined further.<sup>418</sup>

For Roosevelt, the possibilities entertained within the memorandum were subjects for enthusiasm. He asked Morgenthau to more thoroughly explore the possibility of applying the Trading with the Enemy Act as Oliphant had suggested. The Secretary met with his own advisors on December 17 to discuss the pros and cons of the venture, including the results if Japan circumvented the proposed regulations by converting its assets into sterling, negating the entire endeavour if the U.S. could not entice British cooperation. Morgenthau suggested that Washington contact Sir John Simon, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, by telephone. If Simon could be convinced of the plan's validity, perhaps Britain could be drawn on board. Morgenthau and his advisors shifted their conversation to whether or not the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act would remain advisable if it was guaranteed to lead to war. To this, the Secretary responded that America was ready for war. As a man representing "the activist wing of the Roosevelt administration," Morgenthau was more than ready to oppose anyone who still preached caution at this point:

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<sup>418</sup> Borg, pp 493-494

When a United States battleship has been sunk and three of our people have been killed. For us to let them put their sword into our insides and sit there and take it and like it, and not do anything about it, I think is un-American, and I think that we've got to begin to inch in on these boys.... Now, how long are you going to sit there and let these fellows kill American soldiers and sailors and sink our battleships?<sup>419</sup>

Despite his vehemence, Morgenthau backed down after further consultations with the President during the Cabinet meeting of December 17. At that time, Roosevelt made it clear that he intended to respect the original intent of the Trading with the Enemy Act with its goal being to prevent war rather than to provoke it. He proclaimed that “after all, if Italy and Japan have evolved a technique of fighting without declaring war, why can't we develop a similar one,” declaring repeatedly that the British were antiquated in their belief that economic sanctions went hand in hand with a declaration of war.

After the meeting, excited at the prospect of developing a new means for keeping the peace and with Roosevelt's approval, Morgenthau telephoned Simon. Roosevelt wanted the task handled by the Treasury rather than the State Department and kept as low-key as possible. Explaining the plan to Simon as it had been proposed in Oliphant's memorandum, Morgenthau informed him that Washington was exploring possible steps if Japan's reply to Hull's formal protestation proved unsatisfactory. Simon declared that although he did not like to transact business over the telephone, he was willing to present the Secretary's proposal to the Prime Minister. When Morgenthau next met with Roosevelt, however, the President had “cooled off a bit,” and decided that he was “not in as great a hurry as he had been.” He dictated a message for Simon which decreed the proposed economic measures “corollary to but an essential part of naval conversations and studies about to be made,” and informed him that an American officer would be dispatched to London to discuss Simon's

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<sup>419</sup> Utley, *Going to War with Japan*, p 28

views on the economic phase. This time it was the Americans who were disappointed by Britain's lack of interest in cooperative action. Simon, having spoken to both Eden and Chamberlain, attested that while the British would be happy to see the American officer currently on his way, the possibility of the economic action proposed by the Americans was quite impossible. As Britain had nothing comparable to the Trading with the Enemy Act, it would need to enact special legislation. Furthermore, British officials were convinced that economic factors could not be separated from political and strategic ones. It was Simon's personal belief that there were two types of economic pressure, gradual and long-range or immediate and drastic, the former serving as an irritant and the latter indistinguishable from any other form of action.<sup>420</sup>

Ultimately, considerations for economic actions against Japan were the lesser part of deliberations in the days following the *Panay* incident. The primary focus remained on developing a naval plan to counteract Japanese aggression. The earliest proposal of this nature had been the British suggestion that Roosevelt and Hull had turned down on December 13. On December 14, Admiral Leahy, an advocate of joint Anglo-American war on Japan since the outbreak of Sino-Japanese hostilities, urged Roosevelt to prepare the fleet for immediate action.<sup>421</sup> Roosevelt did not intend to declare war on Japan and stated openly on December 17 that he was not ready for such action. However, he favoured the development of a naval plan which could be acted upon should Japan perpetrate another great outrage. To this end, Roosevelt met in secret with the British Ambassador on December 16 following a White House reception. Hull, the only other man present, contributed little to the discussion, deferring entirely to the President. During the meeting,

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<sup>420</sup> Borg, pp 494-496

<sup>421</sup> Borg, p 496

Roosevelt called for a renewal of the secret, informal, Anglo-American naval staff talks of 1915-1917 - talks that Ambassador Lindsay admitted he had no prior knowledge of. These talks, best held in London to ensure secrecy, were to occur on the understanding that both sides would deny their existence should anything transpire. In reporting the meeting to Eden, Lindsay prefaced his summary with his own observation: “we then had a spell of the President in his worst ‘inspirational’ mood and I admit that I can give no account of what he said which is both consistent and sensible.” Much to Lindsay’s dismay, Roosevelt described at length his plan for a Japanese blockade, using “the word ‘quarantine,’ an echo of his Chicago speech,” far too liberally for his British sensibilities. In providing the details for this blockade, Roosevelt said:

The line should run from Aleutian Island, through Hawaii mid-way between the islands to the north of the Philippines to Hong Kong. Japanese mandated islands would not count and could be starved by military measures. Americans should look after everything up to the Philippines and Great Britain the western section. Battleships should not intervene and should be kept in the rear and it should be a cruiser blockade.... The purpose of the blockade should be to cut Japan off from raw materials, and it might take eighteen months to produce results ... there would have to be prohibition of buying from and of selling to Japan.

Lindsay stressed that Roosevelt’s plan did not come out as one statement, but “piecemeal in response to my horrified criticisms and questions,” which he admitted made little impression on Roosevelt, who seemed “wedded to his scheme for preventing a war (but not hostilities).”<sup>422</sup> It bears noting that, although his ‘inspirational’ mood may have seemed haphazard to an unsettled Lindsay, the President’s plan was in no way a new concept. It was

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<sup>422</sup> Shai, p 129

a clear repetition of the ‘naval quarantine’ which Roosevelt and Welles had developed the previous summer.<sup>423</sup>

Lindsay, maintaining that it would fall upon Roosevelt’s advisors to “restrain his exuberancy” and to make practical some of the useful aspects of his scheme, gave Roosevelt “a perfectly frank description” of the difficulties Britain would face in complying with such a plan. Attempting to divert Roosevelt from his blockade, he again suggested Eden’s notion of naval demonstrations, an idea Roosevelt rejected on the grounds that “it was more important that His Majesty’s government should keep their battleships to look after the situation in Europe.” When Lindsay expressed doubts that American public opinion would back such a blockade, Roosevelt claimed that eighty percent of the letters he had received since the *Panay* incident supported “vigorous action.” Hull piped in that he also had concerns with public opinion, advising that London avoid any public discussion of “joint action” with America.<sup>424</sup>

Forced to endure one of Roosevelt’s worst ‘inspirational moods’ and to listen to Hull’s warning against public discussion of cooperative action, it would be easy to assume that Lindsay reported negatively on the entire meeting. Instead, he concluded his report to Eden with a personal observation:

From the foregoing you may think that these are the utterances of a hair-brained statesman or of an amateur strategist, but I assure you that the chief impression left on my own mind was that I had been talking to a man who had done his best in the Great War to bring America in speedily on the side of the Allies and who now was equally anxious to bring America in on the same side before it might be too late.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Haight, John McVickar, pp 209-210

<sup>424</sup> Haight, p 211

<sup>425</sup> Best, p 46

Lindsay fully understood that Roosevelt had not invited Britain to join in a naval blockade of Japan, since he had qualified the entire plan as an option when faced by “the next grave outrage.” Instead, Roosevelt had given new life to Eden’s hope that the *Panay* incident would lead to closer Anglo-American relations. As Anthony Best noted, although the Foreign Office recognized a blockade to be a “fantastic chimaera” given its logistical difficulties, it still indicated that Washington was at least interested in some form of joint action – which could hopefully be directed toward a more practical expression of opposition to Japan’s policies.<sup>426</sup>

Though Secretary Morgenthau’s account proved beyond a doubt that Roosevelt was considering an economic plan within the scope of the Trading with the Enemy Act, the President’s meeting with Lindsay shows that he put greater personal emphasis on a naval blockade in conjunction with Anglo-American naval conversations. Roosevelt certainly did not wish to abandon the Treasury Department’s scheme altogether, as evidenced by granting Morgenthau the authority to contact Simon by telephone. He preferred the plan allowing him to put into effect the quarantine process devised in collaboration with Welles the previous summer.

This view is supported by the account of Harold Ickes, Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Interior and a self-described pacifist who, writing in his diary on December 18, recounted the Cabinet meeting the day before. Ickes’ account differed somewhat from Morgenthau’s in stating that Roosevelt dwelt considerably longer on naval issues than he did on the Trading with the Enemy scheme. Pleased with his meeting with Lindsay the day before, Roosevelt wasted no time outlining his naval quarantine plan. Ickes noted with interest, “the one member of the Cabinet who is least fit of all physically is the one who is strongly urging

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<sup>426</sup> Best, p 46

war.” Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Navy, Claude Swanson, made it clear that “he wants war and he wants it right away. At the very least he wants to send our Navy to Hawaiian waters.” Despite presenting “poor old” Swanson as being somewhat senile, shouting “for war in his feeble old voice,” Ickes acknowledged that the Secretary’s point of view could not be lightly dismissed. Since war with Japan was “inevitable sooner or later,” Ickes questioned, “if we have to fight her, isn’t this the best possible time?” With Japan preoccupied in China, it seemed an opportunity to capitalize on Japanese weaknesses. After all, Ickes mused, “if we should strike now, could not we put Japan in her place at a smaller cost in life and treasure than might be possible at any time hereafter?”<sup>427</sup>

It seemed clear to Ickes that Roosevelt, secretive even with his own Cabinet, was working on a plan of cooperation with Britain. Remarking that “he wanted the same result that Swanson did but that he didn’t want to have to go to war to get it,” Roosevelt suggested that between the American and British navies, it would be a “comparatively simple task” to create a naval blockade around Japan which would bring it to its knees “within a year.” Referring to the Trading with the Enemy Act, he “called to attention certain powers granted him by Congress in 1933 which he had forgotten that he had ... giving the President very wide powers – in effect the right to impose economic sanctions.” These sanctions were to be used in conjunction with a naval blockade, which amounted to “hostilities without being at war.” Morgenthau recorded that when Vice-President John Nance Garner expressed his opinion that only force could affect Japan, the President replied that economic pressure could be made effective in conjunction with naval pressure, but “we don’t call them economic sanctions; we call them quarantines.”<sup>428</sup> Believing that he could embargo many of Japan’s

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<sup>427</sup> Ickes, 274-276

<sup>428</sup> Blum, John Morton, *From the Morgenthau Diaries* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1959) p 489



essential imports, Roosevelt wanted to consult with the other democratic powers before undertaking such action. An embargo was justified, Ickes believed, as there was “no counterpart in our history to this *Panay* incident.” On that particular point, the consensus at the meeting was that the attack was likely deliberate, especially given the “insolence” that the Japanese had recently shown towards the British. Roosevelt believed that Japan had a number of motives for the attack. First, if it met with no rebuke, its arrogance would impress upon China the strength of Japan. Second, Japan wanted to make it uncomfortable for any Western power to stay on the Yangtze or elsewhere in China because Japan wanted to force all Westerners out of China.<sup>429</sup>

Less than a day after the Cabinet meeting, Roosevelt finalized his decision to dispatch a senior naval officer to Britain. The officer selected was Captain Royal E. Ingersoll, Director of the Navy’s War Plans Division. Though Ingersoll received his instructions from the President directly, he was not briefed until December 23.<sup>430</sup> Staff talks were not to discuss any retaliatory measures for the attacks on either the *Ladybird* or the *Panay*. Both economic sanctions and a naval quarantine were possibilities to be pursued in the event that Japan failed to respond satisfactorily to the formal protest Washington had made immediately after the attacks. However, during the days between the Cabinet meeting and Ingersoll’s departure for London, the *Panay* crisis was effectively resolved.

On December 23, the U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry finalized its investigation of the bombing and sinking of the *Panay*. The thirty-six-point document concluded that as Japanese authorities had been adequately informed at all times of the *Panay*’s movements, it was inconceivable that attacking aircraft, unmistakably identified as Japanese, were not

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<sup>429</sup> Ickes, pp 274-276

<sup>430</sup> Borg, p 497

aware of the identity of the ships they were attacking.<sup>431</sup> Hull immediately cabled the court's findings, but not its conclusions, to Grew for transmission to Hirota.<sup>432</sup> On Christmas Eve, Grew cabled Japan's formal response to America's original note of protest of December 13 which had insisted upon an apology, indemnities, and measures to prevent a recurrence. After "thorough investigations" aimed at determining the attack's real cause, the Japanese government remained insistent that it was entirely unintentional. Nevertheless, the Japanese Navy had immediately ordered its forces to exercise the greatest caution when foreign warships and other vessels were present in order to avoid making a similar mistake, "even at the sacrifice of a strategic advantage in attacking the Chinese troops." Furthermore, "rigid orders" had been issued to military, naval and Foreign Office authorities to pay greater attention to observance of rights and interests of the U.S. and other powers. Japan was also studying ways of improving communication on the whereabouts of American interests and nationals to local authorities. Having already agreed to pay indemnities, Tokyo had also taken steps to punish the individuals deemed culpable. The local naval commander had been removed from his post for failing to take full precautionary measures and eleven naval officers from the responsible fleet and flying squadron had been "duly dealt with according to the law." Hirota emphasized that the recall of Admiral Mitsunami was a particularly severe punishment as it implied disgrace in being no longer competent to command on the field of battle.<sup>433</sup>

Hull sent Washington's response on Christmas Day. Acknowledging that the Japanese had promptly and duly admitted responsibility, expressed regret and offered

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<sup>431</sup> *From CIC, Asiatic Fleet to Secretary of the Navy*, McJimsey, *Documentary History of the FDR Presidency*, Vol. 29

<sup>432</sup> Borg, p 500

<sup>433</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 24 December 1937, *FRUS Japan: 1931-41*, pp 549-551

amends, Washington regarded the response as sufficient. However, it insinuated that it had little faith in Japan's private inquiry into the incident, insisting that it would rely on the report of the Court of Inquiry as the final word on the issue. Nevertheless, the U.S. considered the matter formally closed.<sup>434</sup> Hirota exclaimed that he was very, very happy with this "splendid Christmas present."<sup>435</sup> Grew, considering his government's note a "masterpiece" that showed Washington's good sense in not being "stampeded into potential war" for the sake of saving face, also noted that Japan's delivery of its apology was equally masterful. The Japanese had clearly arranged for the note to arrive in Washington late on Christmas Eve, as "The Japanese could hardly have failed to realize that the Christmas spirit is strong in our country and that the thought "Peace on earth, good will toward men" must inevitably color and influence our decision." With the *Panay* incident peacefully resolved, Grew observed that both nations, for the moment, had safely overcome a very difficult hurdle.<sup>436</sup>

However, Grew did not foresee a return to serenity in the Far East. Ever since the first news of the *Panay* disaster, he had witnessed "two Japans" diametrically opposed. The American Embassy in Tokyo had been "deluged by delegations, visitors, letters and contributions of money – people from all walks of life, from high officials, doctors, professors, businessmen down to school children trying to express their shame..." even though U.S. officials had no doubt that the American vessels operating in their rightful place on the river had been attacked with malicious intent. Grew predicted, "Other hurdles, perhaps even more difficult ones, are almost certain to present themselves, and the patience

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<sup>434</sup> *The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan (Grew)*, 25 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, pp 551-552

<sup>435</sup> *The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State*, 26 December 1937, *FRUS* Japan: 1931-41, p 552

<sup>436</sup> Grew, 26 December 1937, pp 239-240

of the American people is not inexhaustible ... War may very easily come from some further act in derogation of American sovereignty or from an accumulation of open affronts.” There seemed to exist a constant danger which “no one with knowledge of the irresponsibility of the Japanese military as distinguished from the Japanese Government [could] eliminate from the future picture.” Grew left Hirota’s house realizing that “the rock upon which ... [he] had been trying to build a substantial edifice of Japanese-American relations [had] broken down into treacherous sand.”<sup>437</sup>

Though Captain Ingersoll had received instructions from Roosevelt on December 23, he did not leave for London until December 26. In her 1964 study, Borg suggested that Roosevelt told Ingersoll to discuss Washington’s perceived problems with Britain’s new naval construction program and to investigate steps which “might be taken if both England and America found themselves at war with the Japanese.”<sup>438</sup> That Ingersoll did not meet with Roosevelt again between December 23 and December 26 indicates that the President never intended the visit as a means of discussing possible retaliatory measures for the *Panay* sinking. However, his earlier meeting with Ambassador Lindsay demonstrated that the President seriously considered a naval plan which could be put into effect at the “next grave outrage” by Japan, rather than simply entertaining vague notions. Roosevelt’s personal involvement with Ambassador Lindsay, along with his outspoken language, suggests that the proposed staff talks reflected the President’s genuine anxiety over the Far East and his intent to implement some facet of his ‘quarantine’ process.

In London, Roosevelt’s advances were met with confused scepticism and optimism. The British, burdened as they were with a deteriorating Europe, were concerned by

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<sup>437</sup> Grew, 26 December 1937, pp 237-240

<sup>438</sup> Borg, p 497

Roosevelt's insistence on referring to his plan as a quarantine and suspicious of another scheme which merely constituted sanctions. As the Japanese note to Britain regarding the shelling of the *Ladybird* had been less conciliatory in tone than the note to Washington, London was disinclined to consider the affair closed.<sup>439</sup> On December 22, Chamberlain suggested to his Cabinet that Roosevelt's ideas on the plausibility of a blockade were rather naïve as the President had failed to "appreciate the needs of the situation and that it was necessary to convince him that it was impossible to apply a blockade without being ready to support it by force, if necessary." Academic Lawrence Pratt has suggested that Chamberlain and Lindsay "missed the point" of Roosevelt's scheme – that he was sketching out plans for a hypothetical, undeclared war in the future.<sup>440</sup> Suffice it to say that Chamberlain was unimpressed with any plan involving sanctions without material action. A more optimistic Eden welcomed Roosevelt's scheming but wanted to see at least some immediate action as a deterrent to another incident. Both men agreed that if something was to be done about Japan, it needed to be immediate, as Britain's prestige in the Far East was suffering as a result of its "unavoidably passive attitude." They felt that British efforts should focus on educating the President and that Ingersoll might be the one to bring home the realities of the strategic situation.<sup>441</sup> With high hopes, Eden told Chamberlain that "co-operation with the U.S., though difficult to foster, is now, I hope, making real progress." Anticipating his upcoming meeting with Ingersoll, he was sure that the British needed "to do everything we can privately to encourage the Americans."<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Lee, p 93

<sup>440</sup> Pratt, Lawrence, "The Anglo-American Naval Conversations of the Far East of January 1938," in *International Affairs*, 47(4) (October 1971) p 754

<sup>441</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, 22 December 1937, CAB 23/90 pp 327-329

<sup>442</sup> *Letter from Mr. Eden to Mr. Chamberlain*, 31 December 1937, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 625-626

Ingersoll arrived in London on December 31 and met with Eden the next day. Ingersoll, describing American plans as being based on certain assumptions about British policy, said that Roosevelt and Admiral Leahy believed the time had come for an exchange of information. He had been instructed to provide the British Admiralty with details of certain American contingencies in exchange for British information and greater cooperation on some technical arrangements. Eden wanted to know whether or not Washington wanted immediate joint action or simply a contingency plan. Ingersoll replied that he did not know if his superiors were ready to take action, only that his department believed no movements should be made without plans for all eventualities since technical discussions must precede political decisions. Concerning Eden, the Captain concluded that “he was more interested right now in immediate gestures than he was in long-range future planning.” This was further supported when Eden soon departed for a holiday in France, removing himself from the discussions he had so optimistically favoured.<sup>443</sup>

Ingersoll’s first meeting with the Admiralty was on January 3. Conversing at length with Cadogan and Admiral Chatfield, Ingersoll revealed that the U.S. fleet was not kept entirely battle-ready as the peacetime navy maintained its crews at around 85 percent of its wartime complement. Before reserves could be called up, the President must declare an official state of emergency. While it was possible for the fleet to put to sea before this, the Navy Department would almost certainly oppose such a move. Therefore any American plans would depend on public sentiment dictating whether the President could justify declaring a state of emergency. Chatfield noted that Britain’s fleet, given its greater state of preparedness, could be ready to sail by mid-January. However, Britain had “a very important back door to guard” which could limit its Far East efforts. Nevertheless, in the

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<sup>443</sup> *Mr Eden to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)* 1 January 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 628-629

event that the two nations could agree on a combined demonstration, Chatfield believed the two fleets should act in tandem. Both officers agreed that in the event of another crisis, such as a Japanese threat to either Hong Kong or the Philippines, either fleet could be forced into independent action.<sup>444</sup>

Ingersoll's explanation that the President must declare a state of emergency before acting against Japan was not enough to convince Whitehall that Washington was unwilling to participate in any joint or parallel action. While the Foreign Office pushed Lindsay to press once more for a naval demonstration, it understood that American outrage had nearly dissipated following Japan's adept handling of the *Panay* crisis. Lindsay was reluctant, explaining that the Roosevelt administration, which he described as a "horse that will run best when the spur is not used," had to educate its populace before prodding it into action. Furthermore, the Americans "greatly prefer to act independently of us and to avoid any appearance of collusion or joint action." However, he was told on January 7 that given the British Navy's advanced state of preparation, it was imperative that he query the President's willingness to declare a state of emergency and to participate in parallel action, possibly as the dispatch of ships to Hawaii. With pressure mounting in Shanghai thanks to continued assaults on British personnel, the Foreign Office was forced to "consider whether we can still content ourselves with demand for an apology," and believed it might soon be pushed to make a public announcement regarding Britain's state of preparedness.<sup>445</sup> Lindsay responded to this order by asking the Foreign Office not to hold "too sanguine hopes on [a]

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<sup>444</sup> *Foreign Office to Sir R. Craigie (Tokyo)* 3 January 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 631-632 & Pratt, p 756

<sup>445</sup> *Foreign Office to Sir R. Lindsay (Washington)* 7 January 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 638-639

forward state of naval preparations or on favourable disposition of the administration,” since “both are in advance of public opinion and it is the latter which decides the pace.”<sup>446</sup>

On January 9, Eden wrote to Cadogan that it seemed likely that Britain would approve the deployment of the larger part of its fleet to Singapore. If so, it would be preceded by a public statement which would function to inform the U.S. that it could take parallel action if it so desired. Eden believed it would want to take parallel action because he did “not believe that they would sit with folded hands and watch [the] British Empire in jeopardy, if it really came to that.”<sup>447</sup> On January 10, Roosevelt, Hull, Welles and Leahy met to discuss whether the U.S. Navy could be made ready for manoeuvres if the British declared their own navy ready for action.<sup>448</sup> Later that day, Roosevelt’s final response to Britain informed Lindsay that three American cruisers on their way to Sydney would sail for Singapore. If the British did make a public announcement about their preparations, Washington would also announce that the U.S. Pacific fleet was being made ready for action in advance of manoeuvres scheduled for February.<sup>449</sup>

This apparent willingness to back up a British military initiative seems to have caught the British government off guard, forcing it to genuinely assess its own willingness to act. For days, Britain had been pushing the U.S. to back up a naval demonstration in the Pacific. However, if the dialogue between Ambassador Lindsay and Foreign Office is anything to go by, few British Ministers thought that Washington would agree in advance to support Britain’s agenda. This unexpected course of events obliged the British to seriously consider their willingness to mobilize the fleet. Upon reassessing the situation, Chatfield

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<sup>446</sup> *Sir R. Lindsay (Washington) to Foreign Office*, 8 January 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 639-640

<sup>447</sup> *Letter from Mr. Eden to Sir A. Cadogan*, 9 January 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 21, pp 643-644

<sup>448</sup> Borg, p 509

<sup>449</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)* 13 January 1938, *FRUS* 1938, Vol. 3, p 19



and Chamberlain agreed that if a formal announcement was made that the British fleet was mobilizing, the only remaining course of action would be to actually do so. This move would carry with it a degree of finality, fully committing a large portion of Britain's navy to the Pacific. This step, in turn, could undermine Britain's political power in Europe by weakening its Mediterranean fleet – currently an important deterrent to Italian aggression. Chatfield cautioned that “Imperially we are exceedingly weak ... if at the present time, and for many years to come, we had to send a Fleet to the Far East, even in conjunction with the United States, we should be left so weak in Europe that we should be liable to blackmail or worse.” Heeding his advice, Chamberlain decreed that it would be “a most unfortunate moment to send the fleet away and I would therefore take no immediate action which would involve us having to do so,” deciding instead to continue political protest in Tokyo and bide for time.<sup>450</sup>

Dorothy Borg has argued that the motives behind Roosevelt's decision to agree to the British proposal for naval manoeuvres had their roots in the controversy taking place in the State Department at this time. Butting heads yet again, Hull and Welles each sought to steer the administration's foreign policy in a different direction. Hull indicated that his attitude was hardening towards the fascist powers because the Japanese, working in concert with the Germans and Italians, sought to impose their will upon the globe. In the Far East, he proposed that Britain and the U.S. engage in parallel naval measures while simultaneously cooperating in Europe to push for further reduction of armaments. Welles objected to Hull's unworkable plan on the grounds that any large scale action might push Japan to declare war while the American people had become concerned that their government was being drawn into the political machinations of totalitarian states and other

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<sup>450</sup> Pratt, p 757

democracies.<sup>451</sup> Instead, he wanted the President to propose negotiating an international agreement on the broad principles that ought to govern the conduct of international relations. In a memorandum written on January 10, Welles outlined a five step procedure which would see the U.S. engage in negotiations with Germany and Italy similar to negotiations being made by Britain and France, thereby lending support to their efforts. His hope and belief was that a rapprochement in Europe would weaken the Axis' support for Japan, thus moderating its aggression in China.<sup>452</sup>

Roosevelt's readiness to mobilize the Pacific Fleet in support of a similar British move indicates that he favoured Hull's strategy, at least as far as it related to the Pacific. He must also have been feeling confident given that his administration had recently strengthened its capacity to act upon its internationalist inclinations. Much of Roosevelt's desire for secrecy about Ingersoll's mission related to dramatic events unfolding on the isolationist front at home. On January 10, 1938, Congress voted 209 to 188 against a resolution to have the Ludlow Amendment debated and voted upon in the House of Representatives.<sup>453</sup> The Amendment, sponsored by Indiana Democratic Representative Louis L. Ludlow, would have prevented any Congressional declaration of war from becoming effective until it had received a majority vote in a nationwide referendum. In the event of such a vote, the question posed would simply ask: "Shall the United States declare war on \_\_\_?"<sup>454</sup> Such an amendment would have seriously undermined the government's capacity to engage in aggressive foreign policy.

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<sup>451</sup> Borg, pp 510-511

<sup>452</sup> *Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles) to President Roosevelt*, 10 January 1938, *FRUS* 1938, Vol. 1, pp 115-117

<sup>453</sup> Cole, p 253

<sup>454</sup> *President Roosevelt to the Speaker of the House of Representatives (Bankhead)*, 6 January 1938, *Peace and War*, pp 400-401

The Ludlow Resolution vote had not reared up suddenly. In fact, it had been a distant threat for months. Ludlow had introduced a war referendum resolution as early as 1935 and again in 1937. Each had been referred to the House Judiciary Committee which had held brief hearings but had taken no action. Ludlow had campaigned extensively to get the 218 congressional signatures required to force the petitions out of committee but had never come close to achieving this number. With the eruption of the Sino-Japanese war in July 1937 he stepped up his efforts to ensure America's neutrality.<sup>455</sup> Writing to Roosevelt on September 11, Ludlow had applauded the administration's handling of the crisis thus far, commending the President for warning American nationals in China "to leave the danger zones or otherwise remain at their own risk." He insisted that the American public had reacted warmly to Roosevelt's decision to pressure a "handful of Americans in China" to avoid involving the entirety of the nation in a potentially costly war. He urged the President to enact the existing neutrality legislation as "a Christian nation," which should "arise above the sordid profits of war trade," and avoid aiding or abetting the slaughter of human beings.<sup>456</sup> Roosevelt responded noncommittally to the letter with a standard reply drafted by the State Department.<sup>457</sup>

By August, Ludlow had gathered only 185 of the signatures he needed. By December 12, that number had grown to 205. The Congressman's luck changed suddenly with the *Panay* incident. Within two days of its news headlines, he had his 218 signatures and was able to push his resolution beyond the House Judiciary Committee and into the limelight. With the resolution scheduled for House consideration on January 10, its proponents and opponents campaigned aggressively, with high profile individuals present on

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<sup>455</sup> Cole, p 256

<sup>456</sup> *Ludlow to Roosevelt*, 11 September 1937, OF, 150-C, Box 4, FDRL

<sup>457</sup> *Roosevelt to Ludlow*, 16 September 1937, OF, 150-C, Box 4, FDRL

both sides of the issue. In a letter to the President, Congressman Jerry Voorhis stated that his support for the resolution was in no way meant as an attack on Roosevelt's foreign policy. In a situation where "the question is only one of participation or non-participation in a foreign war, involving as it necessarily must do, sending American soldiers to fight abroad, it is no more than right and just for the people of the nation to have a chance to say yes or no."<sup>458</sup> Former Secretary of State Henry Stimson, who recorded his opposition in an open letter published in the *New York Times*, later wrote in his memoirs that he saw the Amendment as "the high point in the prewar self-deception of the American people."<sup>459</sup> Dr. Wayne S. Cole accurately described the fight as cutting "across sectional, party, ethnic and religious lines."<sup>460</sup>

Though the Roosevelt administration realized that years would likely pass before the Amendment could be approved by three-fourths of the State Legislatures, it nevertheless quickly threw its full weight against it. To Hull and the President, the resolution seemed "a disastrous move toward the most rigid form of isolationism" which would "hamstring the nation's foreign policy." Hull wrote in his memoir that if the amendment had passed, it would "indicate to the world that the nation no longer trusted the Administration to conduct its foreign affairs," and "serve notice [to] the aggressor nations that they could take any action ... in direct violation of our rights and treaties, with little if any likelihood of any concrete reaction from Washington." Under the advisement of the State Department, on January 6 the President sent a letter to the Speaker of the House pointing out that the proposed amendment would be impracticable in application and incompatible with

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<sup>458</sup> *Memo from M.H.M.*, 6 January 1938, McJimsey, *Documentary History of the FDR Presidency*, Vol. 29

<sup>459</sup> Stimson, Henry, "Text of Stimson Letter Against War Referendum; Upsetting Precedents," 22 December 1937, *New York Times*, p 14 & Stimson, Henry & McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper, 1948) p 313

<sup>460</sup> Cole, p 257

America's representative form of government. The President argued that "although he realized that sponsors of the proposal sincerely believed it would help keep the United States out of war, he was convinced it would have the opposite effect."<sup>461</sup> Hull wrote another letter to the chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, declaring:

It is my judgement that under our present form of government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people,' our foreign affairs can be conducted far more efficiently from the standpoint of keeping this country out of war than would be at all possible under the operation of any such plan as the Ludlow Resolution purposes. After the fullest consideration I am satisfied that this plan would most seriously handicap the Government in the conduct of our foreign affairs generally, and would thus impair disastrously its ability to safeguard the peace of the American people.<sup>462</sup>

On January 9, Roosevelt telephoned James A. Farley, Postmaster General and Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, asking him to do everything possible to defeat a resolution. Even as the vote was under way, Farley worked tirelessly to convince as many Congressmen as possible to support the administration's position.<sup>463</sup> His fervour paid off: the amendment was defeated as Ludlow's supporters garnered 47 percent of the vote, only 11 votes shy of a different outcome. Hull called the episode "a striking indication of the strength of isolationist sentiment in the United States," since "the administration had to exert its whole force to prevent ... approval of a proposal designed to take one of the most vital elements of foreign policy ... out of the hands of the Government." He lamented how the incident revealed the difficulties the administration faced in carrying out the strong policies needed to restrain aggressor nations.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Hull, pp 563-564

<sup>462</sup> Hull, p 564

<sup>463</sup> Cole, pp 259-260

<sup>464</sup> Hull, p 564

Wayne Cole, however, has maintained that the vote should be viewed somewhat differently. Less than nine months after the adoption of the 1937 Neutrality Act, the Roosevelt Administration had successfully defeated a bid to allow the House of Representatives to even consider the Ludlow Amendment on the floor. As such, the incident revealed the growing power of the internationalists.<sup>465</sup> Considered this way, the Ludlow episode can be seen as evidence that Roosevelt's mission to educate the American people on the merits of international involvement was finding some success. Although the isolationists were far from beaten, the administration had scored major points.

With this timely victory, the President gained the leeway he needed to offer American support for a British-led naval mobilization in the Pacific. However, the British ultimately decided not to act, an important consideration given that the historic trend up until that point could easily lead one to believe that it was America which finally retreated from cooperation. When Ingersoll's talks with the Admiralty closed on January 13, they yielded an Agreed Record of Conversations detailing the limited understanding both sides had arrived at. It came to the underwhelming conclusion that, in principle, "the political and Naval measures of each nation should be kept in step with those of the other nation," but that "nevertheless, it is realized that the circumstances, and particularly any incidents primarily affecting one nation rather than both, may make it difficult to carry out [that] policy."<sup>466</sup> It was mutually assured that British Commonwealth waters would be available for U.S. vessels and that U.S. waters would be available for British vessels in the event that the two nations needed to work together during a war with Japan. Ultimately the agreement was a

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<sup>465</sup> Cole, p 253

<sup>466</sup> Record of Conversations between Captain Ingersoll, USN, and the Naval Staff at the Admiralty, see Pratt, pp 760-763

nonbinding exploration of “what we could do if the United States and Great Britain were to find themselves at war with Japan in the Pacific.”<sup>467</sup>

Ingersoll’s meetings were the last important diplomatic exchanges directly stemming from the attack on the *Panay*. Mark Skinner Watson asserted that, while exclusively naval, the agreement reached there served as “an important step in the renewal of Anglo-American planning relations affecting sea, ground, and air forces alike.”<sup>468</sup> Its immediate effect, however, was limited. Press leaks stirred up questions regarding the extent of U.S. collaboration with the British Navy and forced the administration into damage control lest rumours undermine its recent success over isolationist sentiments.<sup>469</sup> Reporters were told that Ingersoll had only been concerned with British designs for new battleships, while Hull and Leahy denied that the U.S. Navy had any alliance, agreement or understanding with Britain concerning a possible war with Japan.<sup>470</sup> This denial of Anglo-American scheming reduced the likelihood of any demonstrations of Anglo-American unity in the immediate future.

On January 14, 1938, Roosevelt received a letter from Chamberlain stating that Britain was negotiating with Mussolini concerning the potential recognition of Italy’s Ethiopian Empire.<sup>471</sup> As America considered this a rejection of the Stimson Non-Recognition Doctrine key to U.S. foreign policy, it was a shocking announcement which Roosevelt wasted no time responding to. Concerned specifically about British recognition of

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<sup>467</sup> Testimony of Admiral Ingersoll, 12 February 1946, before Joint Committee of Congress, 79<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, in *Investigation of the Pearl Harbour Attack* (Washington: GPO, 1946), pp 4273-4277

<sup>468</sup> Watson, p 93

<sup>469</sup> Borg, p 512

<sup>470</sup> “Navy Message Key to Foreign Policy,” 27 January 1938, p 13; “Leahy Denies Navy has Tie to British,” 3 February 1938, p 6, *New York Times*; *The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the Senate Committee of Foreign Relations (Key Pittman)*, 8 February 1938, FRUS Japan: 1931-1941, Vol. 1 pp 449-450

<sup>471</sup> *The Under Secretary of State (Welles) to President Roosevelt*, 14 January 1938, FRUS 1938, Vol. 1, pp 117-120

an Italian Abyssinia, he felt this would seriously affect Japan's Far East course and the peace terms it might demand of China:

At a moment when respect for treaty obligations would seem to be of such vital importance in international relations, as proclaimed by our two Governments only recently at the Brussels Conference, and at the time when our two Governments have been giving consideration to measures of cooperation in support of international law and order in the Far East ... I cannot help but feel that all of the repercussions of the step contemplated by His Majesty's Government should be carefully considered ... a surrender by [Britain] of the principle of non-recognition ... would have a serious effect upon public opinion in this country.<sup>472</sup>

In a meeting with Lindsay, Hull stressed that American opposition to the Far East campaigns “rests primarily on moral concepts and considerations and, in turn, upon the sanctity of agreements and the preservation of international law.” He argued that the principle of non-recognition continued because it was of “universal importance as a factor and agency in the restoration and stabilization of international law and order” and was fearful that, should a country as influential as Britain abandon non-recognition, “desperado nations” would herald it as ratification of outright treaty violation and diplomacy by force. He stressed that the American people would be disillusioned enough to withdraw support for American policies in the Far East. Furthermore, such action would be disastrous to the League of Nations' credibility now that its major nation membership had been whittled down to Britain and France since Japan's departure in 1933.<sup>473</sup>

Dorothy Borg asserted that the U.S. Government objected because on a practical level it would encourage Japanese aggression and on a moral level it would condone Japan's violations of the principle of respect for international law. Hull did not want Britain to

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<sup>472</sup> *The Under Secretary of State (Welles) to President Roosevelt*, 17 January 1938, FRUS 1938, Vol. 1, pp 120-122

<sup>473</sup> *Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State*, 17 January 1938, FRUS 1938, Vol. 1, pp 133-134



undermine popular American support demonstrated when the government had refused acknowledgement of Japan's aggressive takeovers in China.<sup>474</sup> However, the Secretary's concern was more complex than this. Britain's move underscored the fragility of American Far Eastern policy throughout the 1930s and threatened to reveal the weaknesses which Hull had inherited from his predecessors and continued to employ as Secretary of State.

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<sup>474</sup> Borg, pp 513-514

## CONCLUSION

In October 1937, Hornbeck observed public opinion to be the driving force behind America's Far Eastern Policy:

In this country, we regard statements of principle and declarations of attitude as action. We set great store by public opinion. Among ourselves we find that public opinion is a powerful political agency and that it is likely to determine and control policy. We therefore project our conception of the efficacy of public opinion into the field of international relations. We tend to expect that the opinion of this and some other countries will determine and control the policies of still other countries. We think that if there is developed a widespread public opinion adverse to and opposing the course which Japan is pursuing, this public opinion will cause Japan to desist from that course. We make this a major premise in our reasoning on the subject of "action" – doing this, we may, if we are not very careful, again make the same error that we made in 1932.<sup>475</sup>

Hornbeck referred to Washington's failure to enact the Nine-Power Treaty after the Manchurian Crisis of 1931. The incident was a prime example of over-concern with isolationist sentiment, by acting overcautiously in matters concerning territory far removed from American soil and the immediate concerns of the American people. Between the 1921 Washington Conference and the 1937 Brussels Conference, isolationist sentiment was the deciding factor in all policy decisions made in Washington. State Department officials made repeated efforts to bring other powers into international decision-making to ensure that the onus of action was never placed squarely upon the U.S. American leaders would not sacrifice American prestige, however, and in the years following Woodrow Wilson's efforts towards collective security at the Paris Peace Conference, they felt it necessary to demonstrate moral superiority despite isolationist leanings. The State Department took every opportunity to ensure that its foreign policy served as firm declaration of its principles.

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<sup>475</sup> *Telegram by Hornbeck, 7 October 1937, NHD, Box 4, File 2. LOC.*

The Nine-Power Treaty was a great achievement towards this end because it enshrined U.S. moral principles within an international treaty. It ensured that other powers were legally bound to uphold Chinese sovereignty without requiring the U.S. to take the lead. However, it lacked any enforcement protocols against signatories abandoning its principles, as Japan did in 1931. During the Manchurian Crisis, Secretary Stimson opted for inaction, refusing to invoke the Nine-Power Treaty because, he argued, it was the League of Nation's duty to deal with the situation. Stimson limited American reaction to non-recognition, effectively disguised as commitment to the principles of the Nine-Power Treaty, a move by which the U.S. government could stay aloof from international crises without abandoning the treaties it helped to enact. Hull inherited this foreign policy, relying upon it extensively as he sought to set up the U.S. as a power working behind the scenes rather than leading the charge. The decision not to act upon the Nine-Power Treaty would become the norm for American Far Eastern Policy, and later all American foreign interaction, a proclivity for inaction during which the State Department would profess its expectation that the international community should act upon its duty to uphold the greater good.

The Neutrality Act of 1935 was another direct result of the U.S. desire to avoid entanglements overseas, and even though both Roosevelt and Hull were critical of the first iteration of the act, subsequent revisions in 1936 and 1937 did little to further address foreign conflict. The existence of the Neutrality Acts placed the onus of inaction upon officials in Washington by ensuring that isolationists could always point to legislation designed to keep the U.S. away from foreign entanglement. This effectively trapped American officials who personally were internationalists wishing to pursue U.S. involvement, forcing them to maintain American neutrality lest they face serious political

repercussions. When Roosevelt challenged the isolationists by not enacting the Neutrality Act at the outbreak of war in China in 1937, it was Hull who maintained American non-involvement with his statements of moral principle and offers of good offices. When Roosevelt delivered his Quarantine Speech in October 1937, he revealed his desire to find a plan to establish lasting international peace. He hoped to find a solution whereby peaceful members of the international community could oppose aggressor states without involving themselves in hostilities. Roosevelt had the close support of Sumner Welles who had helped develop the rudimentary plan of action the President put forward in Chicago. However, their fledgling strategies were repeatedly shut down by the British under Chamberlain who believed that they were impractical and that Washington could not be trusted to act upon its own plans. In this sense, the American government had worked itself into a pseudo boy-who-cried-wolf scenario whereby it stayed aloof for so long that nobody trusted it to carry out its initiatives while claiming a willingness to do so. Therefore, despite the fact that Roosevelt was impatient with Hull's methods, the schemes he developed with Welles went nowhere. Unable to devise an alternative course, he, as far as China was concerned, was prepared to support Hull's policies.

When the Nine-Power Treaty was finally enacted and its signatories agreed to meet in Brussels, Hull insisted upon sticking to the letter of the Conference invitation stating that the parley would address a peaceable end to the war only. He refused to hear any proposal of sanctions, shutting down all the attempts made by America's representative, Norman Davis, to find an Anglo-American solution. In this regard, the Brussels Conference further highlighted the disconnect between the President and the Secretary of State. Roosevelt, who had met with Davis and encouraged many of his internationalist viewpoints, lacked a

concrete plan of action in the Far East, and chose not to involve himself once the conference was underway, leaving Hull in complete control. This allowed Hull to dictate Washington's policy, taking the opportunity to restate many of the moral principles he had previously outlined. While there is ample evidence that Roosevelt, Hull and much of the administration supported China and wished to see an end to the conflict, when the opportunity arose to act, Hull adamantly opposed involvement in a conflict which would be harshly criticized by isolationists.

In his worldwide statements of July 16 and August 23, 1937, Hull enumerated the principles he felt must be respected to preserve world peace, a great effort on his part to convince the world that vigorous action was needed toward any nation that violated these. He continued this argument in Brussels, helping to draft a concluding statement reiterating the principles of the Nine-Power Treaty and preaching negotiation. Hull's consistent adherence to this strategy of moral persuasion while avoiding any firm stand against Japan was a direct result of his powerlessness to oppose isolationist sentiment. In his memoirs years later, he argued that Washington's foreign policy towards Japan assumed as constructive an attitude as it could toward friendly relations between China and Japan and toward working with Britain and France without unduly arousing isolationism at home. While it was true that American policy did not prevent Japan from continuing war in China, it kept it from solidifying its hold there and it marshalled world opinion against Japan. Most importantly, he argued that it gave the American people time to perceive the basic issues involved and the American government time to prepare for the struggle to come.<sup>476</sup>

That Hull was correct about one thing is certain: his policy of inaction kept the U.S. away from foreign entanglement long enough for isolationist sentiment to wane. However,

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<sup>476</sup> Hull, p 571

the American people concluded that a firmer international stance was not needed because of Hull's repeated moral persuasions. When the *Panay* was sunk in December 1937, it briefly appeared as though Washington might engage in vigorous retaliatory measures. Many senior administration officials believed this to be inevitable and that immediate action offered a greater advantage than postponing the conflict. However, the American people responded nearly uniformly that the incident did not justify war. While Roosevelt explored a variety of options from the feasibility of naval action to the possible seizure of Japanese assets stateside, in the end the only action of note was the dispatch of Captain Ingersoll to England to facilitate staff talks with the British Admiralty, the minimal success of which was undermined by rumour and denial.

While it would be easy to write off the *Panay* incident as an isolated event doing little to alter the landscape of America's Far Eastern Policy, there is evidence that there was a subtle shift at the time which would have an impact on the administration's strategizing. Though still opposed to overreaction - Swanson's demand for war comes to mind as a prime example - the people had hardened somewhat in their opposition to Japanese aggression. The administration's significant victory over the Ludlow Amendment on January 10, 1938 indicated that people were no longer willing to turn a blind eye to international relations. On several occasions, Roosevelt had argued the importance of educating the public on the need to remain involved in world events to maintain world peace. The *Panay* incident succeeded where he could not. The feeling in Washington had long been that the international situation was becoming increasingly dangerous, with aggressor nations threatening to get out of control, and for the first time it seemed that public opinion was beginning to reflect some of its own concerns. It would be a stretch to say that public sentiment had shifted enough to be

called internationalist, or even to say that it was no longer predominantly isolationist. However, Roosevelt's triumph over the Ludlow Amendment gave him renewed confidence to pursue a plan like the one he had been considering with Welles for months. He abandoned Hull's policy of inaction, accepting a British plan calling for naval mobilization in preparation for a deterrence mission in the Pacific. Unfortunately for Roosevelt, the sudden change in strategy caught the British underprepared and unwilling to commit since by this time they were too concerned with the growing European threat to act upon earlier plans.

When the British government approached Washington in January 1938 with the thought of appeasing Mussolini, Hull acknowledged that the non-recognition policy guiding U.S. relations in the Far East "presented difficulties over a long period [since] such a policy might eventually find large areas of the world unrecognized..." However, he argued that it was still a moral force, and for one or two nations to throw it overboard would result in a breakdown of the international system. The question of "when and how the permanency of the policy might be modified by some general arrangement entered into by all or most of the nations of the world in an orderly manner could be left to the future."<sup>477</sup> The Secretary failed to acknowledge that by 1938 the international system had already broken down to such an extent that continued reliance on the Stimson Doctrine would only encourage hostile powers to continue seizing territory by force, safe in the knowledge that they would face no repercussions. Hull's policies had served their limited purpose – to act as a delaying action until the isolationist sentiment had sufficiently waned for Roosevelt to enact more proactive strategies.

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<sup>477</sup> Hull, pp 580-581

The British eventually moved ahead with their policy of appeasement and the proposition for a joint Anglo-American naval operation in the Pacific was ultimately abandoned. However, Roosevelt's confidence in internationalism remained and on January 28, 1938 he asked Congress to approve the construction of a larger navy. A few short weeks after Ingersoll returned to the U.S., his discussions with the British Admiralty were taken into account for revisions to War Plan Orange, America's comprehensive strategy for dealing with a possible war with Japan. While the updated plan placed less emphasis on naval operations specifically targeted against Japan and greater emphasis on an overall defense policy, it still signalled a more proactive effort by American officials to be prepared for a U.S. involvement in hostilities. The attack on the *Panay* ultimately served to steer Washington away from a strategy of non-involvement – its legacy a rise in internationalism and a rejection by Roosevelt of an aloof, inherited foreign policy which had steered American decision making in the Far East since the end of the First World War.



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