

THE STIMSON POLICY AND THE LEAGUE

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IT would be a bold prophet who would predict the outcome of present conditions in the Far East. Under an apparent lull one notices uneasy rumblings, and a tension which may yet end in provoking a disastrous conflict, with Russia and Japan as the chief protagonists. The situation is filled with dark uncertainties, and the most that one dares to hope is that things will remain merely bad, instead of going from bad to worse. Meanwhile, there is a breathing space which makes it possible to assess the developments of the past year in their bearing upon world politics. Here at least a clear, if tentative, judgment can be reached. For the recent crisis, more than any event in the past decade, has thrown a searching light upon both the possibilities and the difficulties of the conception which, in theory at least, has dominated international relations ever since the war.

That conception is the idea of group security, and its tangible symbol is the League of Nations. Since the Treaty of Versailles the hopes for world peace, slender as they may be, have been pinned to the possibility of settling international disputes through the agency of some such institution. And though the actual performance of the League had given ground for only a moderate optimism, the hope still remained that time and goodwill would combine to establish it, even in a modified form, as an arbitral body whose existence would greatly minimize the risk of serious war. The Manchuria-Shanghai imbroglio has been a rude blow to these hopes. More than any other event since the war, it presented the League with a serious test of the whole ideal upon which that organization was based. With the results before us, we are able to see with a new clarity both the difficulties in the way of achieving such an ideal and the price which must be paid for its achievement.


The League of Nations is not a new conception. An effort to apply its fundamental principles goes back at least to the struggle against Napoleon, and the abstract idea is older still. The dilemma which such an effort presents was clearly shown during the nineteenth century, and has been revealed with new force by the situation in the Far East.

It is the dilemma between security and sovereignty. On the one hand is a real desire to eliminate war by substituting consultation and concerted action in international disputes, and to make such a method the basis of national security. On the other hand is the reluctance of individual nations to abandon the unchecked independence of sovereign States in cases where their peculiar interests seem to be involved—interests of prestige, or aggrandizement, or the vague and all embracing cause of “national honour”. And because the latter, rather than the more idealistic conception, is the one which has a real and effective hold upon national emotions, it has hitherto triumphed whenever the two ideas came into direct conflict.

The dilemma was forcibly illustrated by the recent crisis. To the idea of group security and concerted action Japan opposed the ruthless and unchecked imperialism of half a century ago, standing resolutely upon her individual sovereignty, and justifying her action on the plea of national necessity. Japan was able to proceed without serious interference because such a plea struck an answering chord in the bosoms of her fellow-members of the League. It was not merely that various parallels—that of Britain in India, or of France in Morocco—lay on their consciences and hampered them in any effort at intervention. It was the fact that the spirit behind these parallels has been neither regretted nor abandoned, and the idea of checking an independent State in the exercise of its sovereignty could be made effective only by States that were willing to submit their own sovereignty to voluntary limitations. Because no single State has yet carried its idealism to this point, Japan holds Manchuria to-day.

That, however, is only one obstacle. Even given a willingness to make the necessary concessions, there are still considerations connected with the machinery for checking aggression which might give rise to serious hesitation on the part of the Powers involved.

The framers of the League Covenant were concerned with making it a practical and effective instrument for world peace. They were not blind to the dilemma which the effort involved, nor to the possibility that, in a specific case, a State might decide to throw over the Covenant and defy the League by some such adventure as Japan undertook in Manchuria. It was imperative that in such a case the concerted pressure of the remaining Powers should be exerted to bring the erring State to reason.

 The nature of this pressure was laid down in Article XVI—the Article on Sanctions, which represents an effort to “put teeth

in the League." By it, a member State that engaged in war in disregard of the Covenant was deemed to have committed an act of war against all other members of the League. These members undertook to sever all financial and commercial relations with the offending nation, and to prevent any such relations between that nation "and any other State, whether a member of the League or not". In other words, there was to be an embargo, supplemented if necessary by a blockade. There was to be mutual support "in order to minimize the loss and inconvenience resulting from these measures", or from any attempt at retaliation aimed at a single one among them. By such steps it was hoped that the defiant State might be brought to reason without the employment of armed force.

It has been customary in some quarters to criticize the structure of the League as lacking in real power to enforce decisions, and to demand that more potent weapons be placed at its disposal. But if there is one thing which the recent crisis has shown beyond shadow of doubt, it is that the weapons which the League holds at present are already too powerful for use in the existing state of world opinion, and that any effort to use them might disrupt the League itself.

Take the case of economic sanctions. It is all very well for the Covenant to assume that the loss to any one country will be minimized by the support of all the Powers. But there may easily arise cases in which this would by no means be true. If such measures were necessary against Germany in the near future, it is probable that Britain would sustain a loss which she could ill afford, and which would hardly be compensated by the knowledge that France was on her side, especially as France would be gaining considerable political advantage at comparatively small cost to herself. International altruism has not yet reached a point where it could stand so great a strain.

The case of a blockade is even more serious. In any such naval operation, the chief burden would inevitably fall on Great Britain. Not only would she bear the brunt of hostility in the blockaded nation; she would have to interfere with the commerce of all its customers, whether members of the League or not. From the very outset, British opinion has recognized that this would inevitably lead to trouble with the United States, and has been firm in its refusal to take the risk. No such action could possibly be contemplated unless the United States were willing to lend an active co-operation.

Under ordinary circumstances, then, it would be almost impossible to apply the sanctions against a first-class Power. The

nation whose economic interests were most involved would not necessarily be the nation most eager for action, and would at the same time have little faith in the co-operation it might expect. It would have still less faith in the effective continuance of such support should it be faced with economic retaliation once the actual crisis had blown over. And behind it all is the acute question, still far from clear, of whether an attempt to apply these sanctions might not actually precipitate an armed conflict, in which the Power most concerned would find itself unsupported. Until the efficacy and certainty of international co-operation is far more assured, no individual Power is going to risk becoming a solitary sacrifice for the dubious benefit of the rest of the world.

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As it happens, however, the circumstances in the Far East were far from ordinary. A number of factors were present which greatly mitigated the dangers attached to vigorous and concerted action. Paramount among these factors was the attitude of the United States.

America from the outset showed a most earnest desire to deal with the crisis in a vigorous and decisive fashion. Her willingness to support the League outran the usual benevolent passivity, and came remarkably close to active pressure. When the Council of the League, recognizing the necessity of American co-operation, resolved in September to forward all minutes and documents to the United States Government for its information, Secretary Stimson responded with an expression of "whole-hearted sympathy" for the efforts of the Council, and a promise to forward Identic Notes to Tokio and Peking along the lines of those drawn up by the League. And when the League ran into the difficulties of dissension and timidity which checked its early promise of prompt and effective action, the American attitude became still more positive. On October 9th, a telegram from the Secretary of State urged the League to "exert all pressure and authority within its competence"; and three days later a further request, with a promise of supporting action, was sent by the United States Government. This, with the presence of an American delegate at the sessions of the Council, was full earnest of the American desire to lend effective co-operation in bringing about a speedy settlement.

The Stimson policy was clarified and brought to a climax by the Identic Note addressed to China and Japan on January 7th. Reminding both Powers of their obligations under the Kellogg Pact and the Nine-Power Treaty, it embodied a warning that the United States would refuse to recognize any settlement which in-

fringed on its treaty rights, or might be brought about "by means contrary to the covenants and obligations" represented by the agreements of Washington and Paris. This attitude was elaborated in the letter of Secretary Stimson to Senator Borah on February 24th, in which the Nine-Power Treaty was represented as the foundation upon which rested all the disarmament agreements reached at Washington in 1922. Implicit in this view was a warning that the United States might consider herself released from these agreements if the Nine-Power Treaty were violated, and a pointed statement that such a situation had already arisen. "It is clear beyond peradventure," said the letter, "that 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".

The basis of the United States attitude, as revealed in these communications, is worth some attention. Clearly the Government had no strict concern with a violation of the League Covenant, to which it was not a party. But in his message to the League on October 12th, pressing for action and promising support, Secretary Stimson asserted that the United States would not forget to remind the countries concerned of their obligations under both the Kellogg Pact and the Nine-Power Treaty. It was upon these documents that action was based throughout.

The nature of that action, however, shows how inescapably the United States has been drawn into the orbit of the League. However much she may avoid formal adherence, America has, by her international policy since the war, entered into relations whose implications are such that a close approach to the League becomes more and more inevitable—unless these relations are to be abandoned as entirely fictitious the moment they are faced by a practical test.

Take the Kellogg Pact. It has never pretended to be more than an embodiment of pious aspirations; and cynics have been ready to describe it, in Castlereagh's phrase about the Holy Alliance, as "a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense." It is, in fact, a statement of the League principles without the backing of the League machinery or the League sanctions;—a transparent soul which refuses to be provided with a body. It is now clear that pious aspirations are not enough. The question of making the Pact effective has been raised in an acute form, and it is seen that the alternatives are to renounce any hope of its efficacy or to attempt some form of group pressure against any Power which violates its provisions. And since the League is the only established organization

through which group pressure can be exerted, it is natural that America should unite her efforts with those of the League in a crisis of this kind.

In this case such considerations were reinforced by the question of the Nine-Power Treaty. Here the lack of machinery was not so vital. It would be quite possible to summon a conference of the signatory Powers and—in theory—agree on concerted action. But such a method might be even slower in its operation and less effective in its decisions than the method already at the command of the League, of which most of the signatory Powers were members. Hence, on both these counts, the crisis found America and the League endeavouring to apply a united policy.

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It will be noted, however, that this policy was somewhat negative in character. The positive and preventative side of the League machinery was not brought into operation, nor was it specifically advocated by the United States. The Stimson policy went no further than to threaten refusal to recognize a situation arising from a breach of certain treaties. It did not raise the question of the means by which such a breach might be averted.

Nor was this a possibility to be expected. Indeed, it is remarkable that the Secretary of State went as far as he did. Opinion in the country was divided and confused, with a persistent underlying reluctance to become involved in any controversies abroad. Under these circumstances, the active efforts of Secretary Stimson were by no means lacking in courage.

What could not be done by America might, however, have been attempted by the League. Strong in the friendly assurance of American co-operation, it might have taken a golden opportunity to exert full pressure upon a defiant member State. The United States might not have co-operated in the application of positive sanctions, but it would in all probability have viewed such application with friendly benevolence. Nothing of the sort was attempted. Indeed, far from taking the lead which the attitude of the United States made possible, the League showed considerable reluctance to go to even the moderate lengths which America desired.

The Identical Note of January 7th, sent by Washington to Tokio and Peking, contained a paragraph which was a definite invitation to the League and its component Powers. After stating its refusal to recognize a situation which violated international covenants, the American Government said:

If a similar decision should be reached and a similar position taken by the other Governments of the world, a *caveat* would be placed upon such action which, we believe, would effectively bar the legality hereafter of any title or right sought to be obtained by treaty violation.

It was a definite call for the backing of all Governments of good-will.

The League is swayed by the Great Powers. Paramount among these Powers are Britain and France. The attitude of these two nations was crucial in the present instance, and especially the attitude of Great Britain. Germany was fully occupied with her internal problems. Italy, with no pressing interests engaged, adopted a benevolent passivity. As for France, her position was somewhat ambiguous. With her insistence on the sanctity of the Treaty of Versailles, one would expect to find her upholding the inviolability of all international engagements. But that is a far-sighted view not wholly characteristic of French policy. Against it was the fact that her interests in China were remote from the scene of conflict, and relatively unaffected by it; also a certain cynical realism which was prepared to see a strong nation make the most of its opportunities, provided French interests were not endangered. Perhaps most significant, the important firm of Schneider's was, it was said, doing remarkably well out of munition orders. So France remained aloof.

The situation therefore hinged on the attitude of Great Britain. With a positive and vigorous policy she might have won at least the neutrality of France. She might even have swung the League's decision against possible French opposition. And, failing that, it would have been quite possible for Britain and the United States, acting together, to carry out a policy of profound influence upon the situation.

Sir John Simon is in control of British foreign policy. His whole influence in the League during the crisis was against positive action. This attitude had its most deplorable consequence as a result of the Identic Note. Two days after its despatch, the following communiqué was issued by the British Foreign Office:

His Majesty's Government stand by the policy of the open door for international trade in Manchuria, which was guaranteed by the Nine-Power Treaty at Washington.

Since the recent events in Manchuria, the Japanese representatives at the Council of the League of Nations at Geneva stated on October 13th that Japan was the champion in Manchuria of the principle of equal opportunity and the open door for the economic activities of all nations. Further, on December 28th, the Japanese

Prime Minister stated that Japan would adhere to the open door policy, and would welcome participation and co-operation in Manchurian enterprise.

In view of these statements, His Majesty's Government have not considered it necessary to address any formal Note to the Japanese Government on the lines of the American Government's Note, but the Japanese Ambassador in London has been requested to obtain confirmation of these assurances from his Government.

Such a statement, evading as it did the whole issue raised by the Identic Note, could be read by Washington only as a deliberate rebuff. It was the more serious because of the importance of Britain in the councils of the League. Not merely did it mean that Britain refused to act; it meant also that the League, left without positive leadership, adopted the same attitude. And so a great opportunity was missed.

It is true that steps were taken, over two months later, which somewhat altered this position. The Shanghai crisis had developed in the meantime, and it was dimly penetrating into the brains of European statesmen that the situation was too serious for benevolent aloofness. Finally, on March 11th, the full Assembly of the League adopted a resolution which was substantially a ratification of the American position. But the damage had been done. In the face of the rebuff of January, the desire of the United States for cordial co-operation had been notably modified, and the resolution was far too belated to retrieve the situation.

Thus a tremendous opportunity was lost. Never since the war have circumstances been so favourable to the use of the League's powers for peace. The assured support of the United States removed all fear of conflict as a result of the application of pressure. The brunt of any economic loss, in case of retaliation by Japan, would have fallen on the United States far more than on any of the League members. Most important of all, the association of America with the League in joint maintenance of international engagements would have been a precedent for the future whose importance is quite incalculable. Instead of these results, there has been a successful defiance of the League by Japan, a new proof to America of the folly of trying to co-operate with Europe, and an irretrievable blow to the whole basis of the League.

The situation has its apologists. Mr. Kellogg, expressing his horror of group pressure, said on April 16th:

The idea that the Pact of Paris ought to be completed by a series of military, economic or financial penalties is a great mistake. No penalties can ever prevent war. The application of coercive measures will only tend to inflame an incipient conflict. Only

the determination of men to settle their differences by juridical means and not by force will prevent war. The addition of penalties to the Pact would be extremely dangerous.

And Sir John Simon, speaking in the House of Commons on March 22nd, expressed much the same idea:

The authority which the League really exercises is founded upon its position as the authorized exponent and interpreter of world opinion, and that is one of the most terrific forces in Nature. . . . When world opinion is sufficiently strong and unanimous to pronounce a firm moral condemnation, sanctions are not needed; yet that is the class of case in which sanctions would most likely be applied.

It is doubtful whether Sir John Simon, as a lawyer, would care to apply this principle in ordinary civil affairs. And, unfortunately, world opinion seldom has the basis of intimate knowledge necessary for strength and unanimity in a remote and complex problem such as that raised by the Far East, especially when the waters are muddied by interested or malicious forces. Nor is it uniformly the duty of statesmen to wait for strength and unanimity before taking action. There are times when it is essential that they should give a positive lead to world opinion, especially since it is frequently they alone who can make it effectively vocal. The tragedy of the Far Eastern crisis, from the world point of view, is that the statesmen failed to give such a lead to the large mass of opinion which stood for international legality, and that those of the League rejected the sincere approach made by the United States Government. If, under these circumstances, the members of the League really think that it has fulfilled its function as "the authorized exponent and interpreter of world opinion," then the outlook for the future of international conciliation is very gloomy indeed.