

“Anarchy” against “Order”: French Elite Perception of the Conflict in Manchuria

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Abstract

The fall of the French empire in Asia is directly linked to the Second World War and France's policy of appeasement that preceded it. The issue of France's attitude to the invasion of Manchuria is important for understanding what French policy in East Asia was during the 1930s. For these reasons, this article intends to show the attitude of French political leaders and how, unable as they were to condemn the aggressor, Japan, it led to the policy of appeasement pursued by all French governments with regard to Japan during the rest of the decade. To do so, this article is based on the published diplomatic archives of the United States and the articles published by the newspaper *Le Temps*, the unofficial organ of the Third Republic.

Keywords

Sino-Japanese War – Manchuria – France – *Le Temps* – Briand – Herriot – Claudel

1 Introduction

From Eric Hobsbawm's perspective, the conflict which arose in 1931 in Manchuria, was not simply an “incident” but the beginning of a war which was not to end before the use of the atomic bomb by the United States or the intervention of Soviet troops against Japan. These events, which from the

beginning threatened the established order in Asia, concerned the Western powers present in Asia, mainly the United States, Great Britain and France. These powers were all the more concerned as they had important interests both in China and in the surrounding countries. Yet these powers seemed reluctant to intervene. Finally, as Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery wrote, the Second World War “sounded the death knell” for colonial empires ([1995] 2009, 325).

Japanese expansionism, marked by the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and then by the attack against the rest of China in 1937, raised the question of the defense of Indochina, in which, over the same period, had developed “a vigorous Vietnamese national movement” (Brocheux Hémery [1995] 2009, 325). The evolution of Indochina during the inter-war period brought with it contradictions that were strong enough to bring down the regime over time, but the defeat of France in 1940 made the colony an “easy prey for the Japanese” (325) and hastened the end of the empire in Asia. As Georges Grandjean, future Director General of Security and Political Affairs, wrote in January 1931: “We no longer have anyone with us ... Really, we should do something here other than repress.” However, nothing was done and if “the colonial regime [held] Indochina firmly, [it had] gone on the defensive.” (323) In such a context, any external event was likely to deliver the deathblow to Indochina. This was the role played by the Japanese. The French government made it easier for them by adopting a policy of appeasement from which they never departed up to the invasion of the Japanese armies.

France’s attitude towards Japanese aggression in China therefore contributed greatly to the breakdown of the colonial order in Indochina, and by extension, in Asia. It is the first manifestations of the policy of appeasement adopted by France during the 1930s that this article proposes to study through the case of the invasion of Manchuria.

In order to show how France’s attitude facing the Sino-Japanese conflict of 1931–1932 already signaled the policy of appeasement of the following decade, this article is relying in particular on the published diplomatic archives of the United States and on the French newspaper *Le Temps*, a daily that represented the positions of the French ruling elite and the Quai d’Orsay. To assess the attitude of French political personnel, it is useful to consult US sources, not because American diplomats were more neutral than the others, but, on the contrary, because as a power with large interests both in China and in Japan, they had a particular interest in properly assessing each other’s positions.¹ This

1 In the aftermath of the First World War, China was, from the point of view of the American leaders, important “as an area which would absorb large quantities of American surpluses,”

article will first present the origins of the conflict, then the French interests in China and their attitude toward the Japanese. The last part will describe the specific position adopted by *Le Temps*.

2 The General Situation in China and Japan and the Causes of the Invasion of Manchuria

When the Sino-Japanese conflict arose over the control of Manchuria, the nationalist troops of Chiang Kai-Shek had already been in control of Beijing since June 8, 1928, and extended the authority of his government to the north of the country. Unity, however, remained incomplete, both territorially and politically. Chiang had to continue fighting against the rebel generals and the Communists whom he had undertaken to destroy following the capture of Shanghai in 1927. The divisions within the Kuomintang, Chiang's party, had not been completely overcome and continued until 1931. After years of division and armed conflicts, the reconstruction effort did not begin until 1932. A National Economic Council was not set up until November 1931. Responsible for drawing up reconstruction plans, it had committees of technicians and had recourse to the assistance of foreign experts. "In the most important branches of economic life, he [created] state enterprises, the activity of which he [controlled] directly" (Renouvin 1946, 335, 337, 340).

At the turn of the 1930s, China intended to challenge the situation imposed by the unequal treaties. The national government had first tackled the question

and as "a region of American interest, activity, and influence for more than a century." From this perspective, it was important for the United States to prevent wars and revolutions in East Asia, and "the best way to accomplish that was to bring Japan into the American-led 'community of ideals, interests, and purposes.'" American leaders offered to Japan a "share in the development of China and an understanding that the United States would help check China's revolutionary nationalism." In return, Japan was asked to agree "to the Open Door Policy and to a program of balanced naval power in the western Pacific" (Appleman Williams [1959] 1962, 140). These proposals were accepted, albeit with reservations, by Japan and were taken up "in the Four- and Nine-Power Treaties signed in Washington in 1922." With these treaties "[t]he United States, Japan, France and Great Britain agreed [...] to uphold the status quo in Asia, and to proceed with the development of China and other areas within the framework of the Open Door Policy" (141). Faced with the events in Manchuria, the attitude of President Hoover "was conditioned by his long-term objective of establishing a community of interest with Japan in Asia, and by his fear of war as the pump-primer for revolution." In the end, between Japanese military expansionism on the one hand and Chinese revolutionary nationalism on the other, Japan was "the lesser evil" (164).

of customs autonomy, the most important from a practical point of view. On this issue depended the possibility of protecting new industries against competition and the capacity of increasing tax resources. In 1928, China reached agreements with the United States, Great Britain, France and twelve other countries. In 1930, the government asked for the abolition of the regime of extraterritoriality but, in 1931, obtained satisfaction only with Italy, Belgium, Denmark and Norway, not with powers such as the United States, Great Britain or France (Renouvin 1946, 345).

Among the powers that had interests in China, Japan was the most determined to defend and expand its positions. In the decade preceding the 1931 conflict, Japanese leaders had to deal with the growing population of the archipelago while rice production had remained stationary. The need to import rice and to be able to pay for it pushed the government to export more. The migration of the rural population to the cities increased the number of job seekers. According to economists of the time, only the development of industry could provide a solution to these problems. The development of industry raised the need for access to raw materials and external markets (Renouvin 1946, 347–348).

During the 1920s, the products of Japanese industry lost part of the markets acquired during the First World War. They remained, however, present in China, in the British Raj and in the Dutch Indies (fabrics, clothing, and household utensils). In 1929, Japanese exports to China accounted for 18% of total Japanese exports while exports to India represented 9%. The Great Depression had the effect of further restricting opportunities (Renouvin 1946, 349).

The crisis hit Japan's industrial and agricultural sectors hard, although the former recovered more quickly, thanks to an investment policy but also due to the growing militarization of the economy. The peasants were the hardest hit by the crisis, and plunged into abject poverty. At the start of 1932, agitators led a number of peasants to ask for relief, a moratorium on their debts and aid for emigration. The peasantry supported the expansionism of the military. The latter rejected the liberal orientation of Japanese foreign policy. This sentiment was displayed during the 1930 London conference when Japanese diplomats accepted a compromise on naval limitations that the military considered unacceptable (Wang 1993, 174–177).

In the early 1930s, Japan stationed an army of about 10,000 men in Manchuria for the defense of the leasehold territory of Guandong (or Liaodong, Kantoshu for the Japanese). Japan had first seized this territory following the war of 1895. Without compensation, the territory passed to Russia, whose intervention

and loans had enabled Japanese action. Following its victory against Russia in 1905, Japan recovered the territory. The Tokyo government sent troops there who were also to provide security for the South Manchurian Railway. This was managed by a company, Mantetsu, of which 50% of the capital belonged to the state. The effects of the crisis threatened the South Manchurian Railway, which the Japanese military in Manchuria saw as confirmation that party politicians were no longer capable of safeguarding Japan's interests. Part of the army in Japan shared their point of view.

On September 18, 1931, Japanese soldiers sabotaged a railway near Shenyang (Mukden) and attributed their actions to "Chinese bandits." This act served as a pretext for military intervention. Japanese troops occupied Manchuria within three months and operations were undertaken in northern China. The Chinese government took the matter to the League of Nations, which set up the Lytton Commission. The Commission concluded with aggression on the part of Japan. In February 1932, the Guandong army proclaimed the independence of Manchuria (Wang 1993, 177).

Regarding the significance of these events, Rana Mitter (2014, chap. 3) wrote that "[t]he 'Manchurian Incident' became one of the most notorious diplomatic crises of the interwar period, one of the first in a series of confrontational acts by militaristic governments that would shatter the fragile peace created after the Great War." In this affair, Tokyo benefited from "a thinly veiled complicity of the great powers" (Wang 1993, 177–178). The United States government considered the Japanese to be better customers than the Chinese and, above all, "better guarantor of order in Asia." Stimson, President Hoover's secretary of state, took a neutral position. The United States contented itself with a moral condemnation of Japanese aggression and a "non-recognition" of Manchukuo. The other Western powers adopted the same position (Wang 1993, 177–178).

3 French Interests in China and Attitude towards Japan

Although the events of 1931–1932 mainly took place in Northeast China, they nevertheless spilled over as far as Shanghai, threatening other countries' interests. Therefore, the study of the reaction of French leaders requires a reminder of what was at stake for France in China. In the second half of the 1930s, Franco-Chinese exchanges were, in the opinion of Roger Lévy, "relatively very limited." In 1913, the import of French products to China and the export of Chinese products to France represented 59.4 million "gold-units" (i.e., customs gold units (CGU) issued by Central Bank of China from 1930 to 1948). From

1925–1926, the value of these goods reached 164 million gold units.. The value of trade collapsed with the crisis. The decline in trade between France and China mainly affected Chinese exports (Lévy 1939, 28). The value of French sales in China, which had risen to 413 million francs in 1928, collapsed to represent only 242 million francs in 1929. The value fell to 161 million francs from 1930 to 1931 and further to 99.3 million francs in 1932 (Lévy 1939, 29).

Despite a trade much lower than that which China maintained with Great Britain, the United States, Japan and Germany, the financial interests of France in China were important. In the year which the Sino-Japanese War began, the French interests amounted to some 2.4 billion francs. “Of this total, 85% was attributable to China’s foreign debt and 15% to loans contracted under the auspices of the central government for the construction of railways” (Lévy 1939, 38–39). At the end of the 1930s, China’s foreign loans amounted to “nearly 9 billion francs and, in this, France’s nominal interest [was] 2,064 million, or 27% of the total. (The British share [was] more than double than that of the French, while that of the United States was between a third and a half; the German debt [was] insignificant)” (40). Besides, French industrial investment in China represented at the end of the 1930s 2.1 billion francs. As for the market value of the concessions, it was estimated at 8 billion francs (Lévy 1939, 61).



Franco-Japanese relations during the 1920s were often presented as cordial. In fact, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, France had visited twice, in 1894 and 1904, “the enemy camp” of Japan, in particular when French authorities hosted the Russian fleet in its colonial ports during the Russo-Japanese war (Binoche 1989, 263–275). As for Japan, in 1905, following the naval victory of Tsushima, it supported the organization of an anti-colonial movement initiated by the representative of Vietnamese patriotic scholars Phan Boi Chau. On the advice of Japanese authorities, the Vietnamese movement had put Prince Cuong De at its head (Brocheux 1981, 165). However, the Franco-Japanese treaty of 1907 seemed to have “erased all traces of resentment between the two countries” (Binoche 1989, 263–275) and Tokyo expelled the two hundred or so Vietnamese revolutionaries who had gathered on its soil (Brocheux 1981, 165). “The 1914 alliance [maintained] a climate of cordiality between the two countries” and, at Versailles, in 1919, France recognized Japan’s territorial acquisitions in China (Binoche 1989, 263–275). Moreover, as Philippe Pons pointed out, when at the peace conference that ended the First World War, Japan proposed to “grant to all foreign nationals of a Member State of the League of Nations fair and equal treatment in all fields and to

make no distinction in their legislation or in fact under the pretext of race or nationality," the text "came up against a nuanced opposition from the United States, a frontal one from Great Britain and Australia" but obtained the support from France (*Le Monde*, December 21, 2018).

Added to this was the fact that the two colonial powers shared the same fear of the development of nationalist movements in the territories under their control, Vietnam for France and Korea for Japan. Thus, as the French Chargé d'Affaires in Japan reported to his minister on June 4, 1925, the general government of Indochina had seen fit to send the deputy head of service to the director of Political Affairs and General Security, Nadaud, to Japan in order to discuss the exchange of information with the Japanese Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior. In order to obtain information concerning the people in contact with the Vietnamese revolutionaries present in Japan, in particular with Prince Cuong De, as well as their movements and their correspondence, Nadaud had given "certain documents on the Korean revolutionaries" of Guangzhou and offered to provide information about the Koreans present in the French concession in Shanghai (FMFAA.C/29CPCOM34).



At a more general level, France's foreign policy had been dominated since the mid-1920s by Aristide Briand (1862–1932). In the late 1920s he was an outspoken supporter of European federalism and intended to place his action within the framework of the League of Nations (Berstein 1987, 321–335). From 1925 to 1932, Briand's chief of staff was Alexis Leger (1887–1975, known under his writer's pseudonym Saint John Perse). For a time, he had combined this position with that of the Director of Political and Commercial Affairs of the Ministry. The Press and Information Service and the telegram offices also depended on him. This situation gave influence to Leger, to the point of "overshadowing" the Secretary General of the ministry, Philippe Berthelot (1866–1934). The latter had previously held the same position as Leger. The secretary general was in charge of all the ministry services and Berthelot held this position from 1920 to 1922 and from 1925 to 1933. After his death, Leger succeeded him until 1940 (Dethan 1984, 157–163).

For the period between 1924 and 1934, French policy is commonly considered to be marked by the Spirit of Geneva and the desire to implement a policy of collective security (Berstein 1987, 321–335). This concept implied that security had to be ensured by means of multilateral treaties or agreements with the potential adversary and was thus distinct from methods prior to the First World War which were based on alliances directed against the opponent (as with the

Entente which brought together France, England and Russia against Germany or the Dual Alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary, directed against France). However, during the 1920s, the system of collective security had not necessarily led to the disappearance of the systems of alliances and France could, if it wanted to, intervene on its own to enforce the order resulting from the Treaty of Versailles (Allain et al. 2007, 318). This policy would have ended because of Louis Barthou (1862–assassinated in 1934) when he declared in April 1934 that France would ensure “from now on its security by its own means” (Berstein 1987, 321–335). The fact is that at the turn of the 1930s, France had, essentially for economic reasons, already embarked on a foreign policy of appeasement towards Germany. In 1930, because of the extent of its debt, Germany had obtained concessions from its creditors and from the French in particular. Thus, in July 1931, the assets of the Banque de France (Bank of France) in Germany represented some 22 million Reichsmarks. The political weight of the institution had the consequence of prohibiting the French government from being firm towards Germany, whatever the evolution of Berlin’s compliance with the Treaty of Versailles, including at the military level (Lacroix-Riz 2010, 67). The lack of firmness on the part of the French government was illustrated by the remarks that Philippe Pétain had made in front of the French ambassador in Washington, Paul Claudel (1868–1955, famous diplomat and Catholic writer). In a memorandum dated November 6, 1931, the Secretary of State reported the words of Claudel according to which the military had told him. He explained that there were plans for a complete reorganization of the French army and that the aim of this reorganization was to be “more agreeable to Germany,” as well as to save money and to be more efficient (USDS 1946, 385).

Incapable of showing any constancy in Europe, France was accused of having adopted too strict an attitude against Japan by admiral Jean Decoux (1884–1963), governor of Indochina, and collaborator of the Japanese during the occupation of the colony. After the Second World War he remained convinced of the validity of the policy of appeasement with regard to Japan. But, according to him, it was indeed such a policy of appeasement that the French governments of the 1930s would have failed to pursue. Decoux wrote that, during the interwar period, it would have been in the interest of France, in order to preserve Indochina, to show caution and to avoid offending the Japanese authorities. However, Decoux argued, France showed a hostile attitude towards Japan during the conflict over Manchuria by adopting the positions of the League of Nations and, according to his own words, “by participating in the brutal condemnation of Japanese activities” (Decoux 1949: 61–62). He

also accused Aristide Briand, one of the main figures of the French diplomacy since the mid-1920s, of having associated France to so-called threats addressed to Japan in 1931 through his own person as the president of the Council of the League of Nations. Such a position illustrates well the logic which, in France, motivated the supporters of the appeasement policy.

French politicians were not, however, anti-Japanese, as is evident in the archives of the United States Department of State. Contrary to what Decoux denounced, the attitude of the French elite during the invasion of Manchuria foreshadowed the policy of appeasement that the declining Third Republic would follow. Regarding the attitude of France facing the invasion of Manchuria, the United States chargé d'affaires in Japan, Neville, reported on September 25, 1931, a discussion with the British and French ambassadors in which the French Ambassador had said that "he had received no special instructions to press the Japanese Government to abide by the League resolutions" but he felt certain that his government supported them (USDS 1946, 66). Japan enjoyed much sympathy among the French elite. This was particularly the case for Paul Claudel, who had been posted to China and Japan before being appointed French Ambassador to the United States. The Under Secretary of the State Department, on October 12, 1931 (USDS 1946, 164–165), reported the remarks he had made before him as follows:

although he thought the Japanese had of course gone too far and that they had not lived up to the agreement made with the League on September 30th, nevertheless his sympathies were with Japan, because he felt that they had endured almost more from the Chinese in Manchuria than was humanly endurable.

Similarly, Eric Drummond, Secretary General of the League of Nations until 1933, observed the situation in France in a way that matched with what the United States consul in Geneva, Gilbert, noted through his contacts with the delegations present during the last session of the Council. On November 7, 1931, Gilbert reported to the Secretary of State that there were in France, and particularly in the French press, "pro-Japanese elements" whose attitude was partly motivated by French munition manufacturers' sales to Japan. (USDS 1946, 388) In his telegram, Gilbert added:

This also [was] reflected somewhat in the French Foreign Office, with Briand far ahead of the latter in respect of the manner in which France and the League conduct the Sino-Japanese question. Briand's policy

[was] supported entirely by Massigli,² while Leger, who supports Briand personally, [was] inclined toward Japan as a phase of French foreign policy. As I have previously reported, Berthelot is more or less frankly pro-Japanese. Therefore, a great deal depend[ed] upon support for Briand's leadership.

The attitude of the French representatives had been denounced by Gabriel Péri (1902–1941)³ who, in the pages of *L'Humanité* (the newspaper of the French Communist Party) on October 12, 1931, had accused French imperialism of siding with the Japanese aggressors. He underlined the suspicious character of the silence observed by the French representative in Geneva two weeks earlier, during the examination of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Stressing the connivance of France with regard to Japan, Péri recalled that at the same time a debate had taken place in a commission of the League of Nations on the subject of the arms truce during which the positions of the French delegates, which he described as ultra-militarist, were supported by the representative of Japan. Above all, Péri reported that voices were heard at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris which commented that France should avoid offending Japan, that the Council of the League of Nations would probably prove unable to do anything to solve the conflict over Manchuria and that, ultimately, Japan did nothing other than what the great powers had done when they intervened in China in 1926–1927 against the revolutionaries.

As reported by the United States minister in China to the Secretary of State on November 3, 1931, French pro-Japanese sympathies were known to the Chinese minister of Foreign Affairs, T. V. Soong, who, at the end of October 1931, had mentioned them to the United States consul general in Nanjing. The Chinese minister had expressed concern about holding a meeting of the League of Nations in Paris because of the “French atmosphere,” and had asked US diplomats to intervene to ensure that the discussions took place in Geneva instead. From T. V. Soong's point of view, the French navy was favorable to

2 René Massigli (1888–1988) was then a member of the executives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had been appointed, in 1928, head of the French Service of the League of Nations (*Service Français de la Société des Nations*). He became French Ambassador to Turkey at the end of the 1930s, to Great Britain after the Second World War, then Secretary General of the Ministry (Ulrich-Pier 2005, 3–16).

3 Politician and journalist. He was member of the central committee of the French Communist Party and member of the Parliament as a representative of Seine-et-Oise (1932–1940). Head of the foreign policy service at *L'Humanité* from 1924. Hostage shot by the Nazis at Mont-Valérien.

that of Japan and, more generally and he felt that Aristide Briand's attitude in Geneva did not reflect the reality of French policy towards China (USDS 1946, 361).

4 The Attitude of the Newspaper *Le Temps*

During the interwar period, the newspaper *Le Temps* was considered as the unofficial voice of French diplomacy. Like most of the influential newspapers of this period, it was controlled by major French capitalists. In 1929, the *Comité des forges* (the Forge Committee was the main organization of the most prominent French capitalists) through François de Wendel, had bought the 51% of *Le Temps* held by Adrien Hébrard Jr., son of the founder of the newspaper. According to the historian Jean-Noël Jeanneney, Wendel wanted to prevent *Le Temps* from being controlled by radicals or groups under foreign influence. The historian added that Wendel wanted the newspaper to remain the unofficial organ of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the eyes of the opinion abroad (Jeanneney 1976, part 6, chap. 11, 2). As for the French police sources, they report that *Le Temps* was one of the newspapers that received money from the *Comité des Forges* (Lacroix-Riz 2010: 9).

On September 21, 1931 *Le Temps* reported that the question of the Sino-Japanese conflict had been presented before the Council of the League of Nations by the representatives of China and Japan on the 19th. It stated that the information given by the representatives of the two parties was "extremely vague" and they did not "clarify responsibilities." From the start, *Le Temps*, in its "*Bulletin du Jour*", carefully avoided presenting Japan as the aggressor. According to the newspaper, any news about Japanese military actions was "questionable" and "did not square" with the Tokyo news. Three days later, on September 24, 1931, *Le Temps* pretended not to know much more about the causes of the conflict. According to the newspaper, the "embarrassment that we [observed] when facing this problem [was explained] above all by the uncertainty in which we still [were] as to the immediate causes of the conflict and the responsibilities at the origin of the crisis." However, it gave more space to Japanese arguments than to those of China. According to the newspaper, the crisis only lasted because the Japanese had still not been able to obtain reparation for the death of one of their staff officers, captain Nakamura, and because of the boycott against their trade. As for the way to proceed to find a solution to the conflict, *Le Temps* reported the divergence of positions between Japan and China, the first wishing that there would be negotiations between the two parties only, the second intending that the discussions take place

within the framework of the League of Nations. *Le Temps* regarded the Japanese position as the most reasonable, especially since it felt that, in Manchuria, Japan had special rights which resulted from treaties. Later, on September 27, *Le Temps* reported the situation in the Northeast of China only based on the Japanese version of the events and presented it as factual. The newspaper also expressed the opinion, reflecting that of the Japanese government, that it was preferable for discussions between Japan and China to take place as soon as possible and for a solution to be found between the two powers concerned. The newspaper stated that this was the only way to end the crisis and avoid war. *Le Temps* maintained this position thereafter.

In the December 29, 1931 edition of *Le Temps*, following the session of the Council of the League which had just ended, André Duboscq⁴ undertook to explain the conflict through cultural lens. He noted that few were “the members of the council who thought, during sessions where the yellows [sic] rehashed their grievances and their points, about this psychological element, essentially Asian and more specifically Chinese, which is the face”. According to the journalist, it was important to know this in order to understand the political situation in East Asia as well as the attitude of Asian politicians and diplomats. Duboscq made reason and logic Western properties, foreign to Asians (and did so without worrying, for example, about the explosion of violence that had ravaged Europe during the First World War). The journalist made an exception with the Japanese only because, according to him, they were more familiar with Western thought:

We spoke there [at the League] two languages, as different as possible from each other. The League of Nations raised law and logic, recalled agreements previously made and ratified, sought testimony, proposed investigations. China, the one that took an interest in the affair, that is to say the politicians, the members of the chambers of commerce and the students, that China, entirely behind its delegate, admirably endowed with the virtues of its race, thought about the face.

4 1876–1949. André Duboscq was a law graduate. A journalist at *Le Temps*, he had become post-war editor of the successor newspaper *Le Monde*. Before 1914, he was a correspondent for *Le Figaro* and a teacher in Budapest, then was sent on a mission by Raymond Poincaré to Tripolitania and the Balkans, before becoming a correspondent for *Le Temps* in Greece. During the First World War, he served in the infantry and went to China and Japan. He spent six months in Indochina in the service of the Ministry of Colonies. He was also a professor at the Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies and at the Institute of Advanced International Studies (*Le Monde*, December 20, 1949).

According to Duboscq, the Japanese had this advantage of being more Europeanized than the other Asian populations. The use of this cultural interpretation finally made it possible to support the line of the newspaper according to which it would have been better not to bring the Sino-Japanese conflict before the League. The journalist wrote that the use of European procedures to settle a dispute between Asians was equivalent to an attempt to "square the circle".

On January 4, 1932, *Le Temps* reported the progress of Japanese troops south of Shenyang in a locality which controlled the access to Manchuria. The Japanese maneuver placed Manchuria beyond the control of the Chinese government. According to the newspaper, Japan was acting according to its rights (Chinese troops had been defeated in Manchuria while the railroad region, which, the newspaper was careful to point out, fell under its treaty authority, was largely under its control). Like Duboscq a few days earlier, the newspaper considered that the case should have retained its local character and that the referral to the League Council had been an error. *Le Temps* resorted to refrain from saying that Western practices could not be implemented in the Far East. The newspaper was content with statements from Japan, which claimed not to have any territorial aims, while China was presented as obstinate. The latter was said to have illusions about the ability of the League of Nations to influence the situation and, before engaging in talks, it called for the withdrawal of Japanese troops from the area surrounding the Southern Manchurian Railway. The newspaper concluded its commentary by repeating that China should not have turned to the League of Nations. On January 23, André Duboscq stated that the Japanese military presence in Manchuria was not equal to a territorial conquest. As the *Bulletin du jour* of January 4 reported, he felt that recourse to the League of Nations had only made the situation worse (*Le Temps*, January 23, 1932).

On January 26, *Le Temps* reported that the Sino-Japanese conflict was among the questions examined during the 66th session of the Council of the League, chaired by Paul-Boncour. The newspaper mentioned the probable departure of Eric Drummond, the general secretary of the League, following criticisms dealing with the Council's attitude in the Sino-Japanese conflict. According to *Le Temps*, the League's resolution gave Japan a free hand in its action against the "bandits" in the regions of Manchuria under its control. The newspaper claimed that China bore responsibility for Japanese military action beyond Tchin-Tcheou and for not having withdrawn its troops behind the Great Wall in a timely manner. *Le Temps* went on to explain that the Japanese intervention, which then went as far as Shanghai, had been made inevitable by the attitude of the Chinese government and the anti-Japanese activities,

especially the boycott of Japanese goods. As usual, the newspaper reiterated its position that the Manchuria affair should not have been brought before the League. *Le Temps* was even worried about a new intervention by China at the League of Nations which would no longer refer to article 11 of the pact, which only imposed conciliation, but to articles 15 and 16. According to the newspaper, these articles required the Council to take a position with regard to a State which had committed an act of war. *Le Temps* felt that the Council of the League of Nations could not take measures other than the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry—that is, the Lytton Commission—which was to leave for China.

On January 30, *Le Temps* conceded to Japan the possibility to free itself from international law. According to the newspaper, in certain specific cases, each power could resort to “means of action adapted to the circumstances and which do not fall within the framework of a real international system”. The newspaper justified this position by the fact that it was not yet possible to determine whether the Japanese action in Shanghai was contrary to the treaties or not. *Le Temps* argued that the context of the Far East made it all the more difficult to understand the events in the Northeast of China and that it was not possible to consider them from the perspectives of the rules that organized international relations in the West. However, *Le Temps* once again gave a simple reading of the situation. Japan intervened in Shanghai because of the anti-Japanese campaign organized by China, to put an end to the boycott of its products and to protect its nationals. The newspaper renewed its fear of seeing the Council of the League seized by China based on articles 10 and 15 of the pact. The newspaper insisted that, in Mukden as in Shanghai, it was a matter of local affairs.



The pro-Japanese stance displayed by *Le Temps* can also be found in academic publications, such as *La Revue d'histoire des colonies* (The Colonial History Review), whose board members included influential people in the economic, political and intellectual fields. Among them were André Atthalin, Director of the *Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas* (Bank of Paris and the Netherlands, today's *BNP Paribas*, or National Bank of Paris) and Managing Director of the *Compagnie Générale des Colonies* (General Company of the Colonies), Louis Finot, Honorary Professor at the *Collège de France* (the most prestigious French research establishment), or François Charles-Roux, ambassador to the Holy See.

In this review, an author, Etienne Marsan, developed views very close to those presented in *Le Temps*. In the September-October 1932 issue, he mocked those in favor of respect for international law who had been opposed to the unilateral recognition of the independence of Manchuria by Japan which had occurred in September. Marsan thought it was ridiculous that one could think that Japanese policy could lead to a general war in all of East Asia. According to him, these fears belonged to literature and not to political analysis. The author took up the idea expressed by the pro-Japanese elements who saw in China a principle of anarchy and in Japan a principle of order and discipline. In doing so, he excluded any analysis in favor of an essentialist prism. In the fight between these two principles, Marsan believed that Japan had a better chance of emerging victorious. As for the position of France in the conflict for the control of Manchuria, he considered that the weakening of Japan was not in its interest. In the January-February 1933 issue of the same review, Marsan criticized the League of Nations for pursuing ideological objectives and wanting to enforce Chinese sovereignty in Manchuria. He further claimed that they were incapable of reaching a conciliation between Japan and China. Marsan rejoiced at the failure of the institution, which he considered a contributor to tensions in international relations.

5 Conclusion

From the US diplomatic archives, it appears that in France the pro-Japanese elements held important positions within the ministry of foreign affairs while this pro-Japanese tendency was openly expressed in the pages of *Le Temps*. This attitude favored de facto Japanese moves in China and heralded the "eastern Munich" to which France was going to engage when the Sino-Japanese war became widespread a few years later, in 1937.

From 1932 to 1937, and even beyond, there was no real change in French policy in East Asia. As the Under Secretary of State reported in a memorandum on October 10, 1932, the ambassador Paul Claudel considered that the French government under Edouard Herriot (1872–1957) was "violently anti-Japanese" (USDS 1948, 295). However, it is difficult to make Herriot an opponent of Japan. On September 9, 1932, he emphasized in front of US Senator Reed, and in the presence of US Ambassador Edge, that French policy was based on respect for treaties and procedures implemented within the framework of the League of Nations. Herriot added that although French policy had to take into account the trade relations France had with China, which were much more important than those with Japan, as well as the existence of a common border between the

two countries, he was not indifferent to the internal difficulties that Japan had to face. From Herriot's point of view, these difficulties included the attitudes of the military and the alleged communist danger (USDS 1948, 239). As for Paul Claudel, he continued to show his sympathy for Japan to his US interlocutors. In a memorandum dated November 22, 1932, the under-secretary of State Castle reported that, after reading the Lytton report, the French ambassador feared that the League of Nations, which he presented as dominated by small nations, would do nothing but censor Japan. Claudel expressed the idea that Japan was the only link that existed between Western nations and the East. Such a point of view was obviously reminiscent of that defended in the pages of the newspaper *Le Temps*, which considered Japan as the most westernized of the countries of East Asia. The ambassador added that he was attached to all the good that there was in Japan, and that he did not want to see the world participate in its destruction. Like Edouard Herriot, he believed that in the face of the communist danger Japan should remain a powerful nation. This position implied that, in Claudel's view, Japan's expansionist undertakings should not be interfered with. As for the issue of the status of Manchuria, he declared that the only attitude to adopt was to refuse to establish official relations with it. Claudel's position was to wait and see what would happen (USDS 1948, 359).

As for Japan, Tokyo did not hesitate to offer France an alliance that granted privileged access to Manchuria. In a memorandum dated October 10, 1932, the United States under Secretary of State Castle wrote that, according to ambassador Paul Claudel, "Japan had definitely and formally offered to make an alliance with France, agreeing that if France would form such an alliance, the Manchurian market would be open to France and that Japan would do all in its power to throw Oriental business into the hands of France." France refused the proposals for a military and economic alliance made by Japan because, according to Claudel, "the purpose of such an advance was to get money from France" (USDS 1948, 295). The rejection by the Herriot government of the alliance proposal made by Japan and the non-recognition of Manchukuo cannot be qualified as a policy more favorable to China. Throughout the duration of the Herriot government, the "Parisian press," including *Le Temps*, remained essentially pro-Japanese. Under Herriot's successor, Joseph Paul-Boncour (1873–1972), French policy remained unchanged. As the US consul at Geneva reported about his position, in a telegram dated December 8, 1932, France remained opposed to the recognition of the independence of Manchuria (USDS 1948, 399).

This attitude of appeasement which was manifested towards Japan from the end of 1931, and which was to continue until the beginning of the war in 1939, had a fundamental role in the destruction of the European colonial order in

Southeast Asia. This policy left France disarmed in the face of the Japanese military threat. When at the end of the decade Japanese troops found themselves at the gates of Indochina, nothing had been done, or almost nothing, to prepare Indochina militarily. The French policy of appeasement with regard to Japan, inaugurated during the conflict for the control of Manchuria, may appear in contradiction with the determination that the French authorities seem to have made, after the Second World War, to avoid the loss of Indochina. In fact, if France was so complacent towards Japan, it was because the latter was locally stronger and represented a principle of order, while 1930s China represented a factor of anarchy, a factor of revolution. In the context of 1945, France no longer had to deal with Japan, a principle of order, but with the Viet Minh, a movement controlled by Vietnamese communists and a threat to colonial economic interests. The writer Eric Vuillard argued in his book “An Honorable way out” (*Une sortie honorable*), the long war waged by France from 1946 to 1954 was not so much aimed at maintaining French sovereignty in Indochina, but, for interests such as those of the *Banque de l’Indochine*, which “from the start of the war had discreetly stopped investing,” in order to give themselves the time to transit their funds “towards more lenient skies” (2022, 184). As the writer observed, several battles could have taken the name of public limited companies, such as, among others, that of Cao Bang which could be renamed the “battle for the public limited company of the Cao Bang Tin Mines,” or that of Mao Khe which could take the name of the “battle for the French Tonkin coal mining company” (57–61).

Abbreviation

FMFAA.C: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives. La Courneuve.

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