

The Manchurian and Abyssinian Crises and the Failure of Collective Security

Written by Anna Costa

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ANNA COSTA, AUG 11 2011

Both the Manchurian and the Abyssinian crises represented instances of the failure of collective security as it was framed by the major powers in the interwar period. By looking at the Sino-Japanese dispute in East Asia and at the Italo-Ethiopian conflict in Africa, this paper argues that the breakdown in enforcement of collective security was ultimately produced by three main causes. The first is a series of problems intrinsic in the formalization of collective security by the League of Nations, namely a loose legal and conceptual formulation and vague terms of enforcement. A second cause is broadly ascribable to the socio-political, economic and security circumstances of the international system between the First and Second World Wars as brought about by the 1929-1933 financial and economic crisis. The third and weightiest cause is a deep contradiction at the level of how individual countries (here the focus will be on Italy, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, France and the United States) understood collective security. The latter point needs qualification. Collective security, as it was framed by the major powers in the interwar period, was a concept in part oxymoronic and in part empty: it was oxymoronic to the extent that specific national security interests proved irreconcilable with the idea of security for all by all; it was empty to the extent that when perceived national security aims did not openly contradict the principle of collective security the two often did not coincide, a gap that translated into a powerful disincentive to embrace collective security as an ideal and enforce it as a practice.

A brief contextualization of the concept of collective security will help in setting the discussion. Article 11 of the Covenant of the League of Nations states that '*Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any of the Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations*'[1][my italics]. Article 11 is extremely relevant as it encapsulates the idea of collective security as was invoked both by the Chinese in their appeal to the League of Nations after Japanese aggression and by the Ethiopians after the Italian mobilization against them. 'On September 21st, 1931, the representatives of the Chinese government in Geneva wrote to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations asking him to bring to the attention of the Council the dispute between China and Japan which had arisen from the events which took place at Mudken on the night of September 18th-19th, and appealed to the council, under *article 11* of the covenant, to "take immediate steps to prevent the further development of a situation endangering the peace of nations"'[2] (my italics). In the same vein, Haile Selassie recalls how he invoked 'the principles of the Covenant' and 'urged the procedure of conciliation and arbitration'[3].

Reference to article 11 by both the Chinese and Ethiopians rested on the premise that their nations had been attacked. After taking into consideration detailed reports from the Chinese and Japanese sides and weighing both versions of what happened on the night of 18 September 1931, the League of Nations Commission came to the conclusion that 'the military operations of the Japanese troops during this night [18 September] [...] cannot be regarded as measures of legitimate self-defence'[4]. Although the initial episode of the Italo-Abyssinian dispute, the Wal Wal incident on 5 December 1934, was left unsanctioned by the League's Commission of Arbitration, which declared that no government could be held responsible for the Wal Wal incident and that no international liability was to be incurred[5], the aggressive character of Italian intentions is illustrated clearly by the words of the US Ambassador in Rome in the summer of 1935: 'In my mind there remains no vestige of doubt that Italy is irrevocably determined to proceed in Africa and that from whatever quarter opposition is offered it will be met by subjected mass attack'[6]. Even though it took Italy to resort to war against Ethiopia before the League took a clear stance on the Italo-

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Ethiopian dispute, it did so at last with the proposed imposition of economic sanctions. The inconclusive outcome of this policy will be explored later. For now suffice it to remark on a crucial fact: at the beginning of both crises, the Chinese and Ethiopian governments thought of responding to aggression by appealing to the League of Nations in name of the concept of collective security. This indicates that they not only attributed legitimacy to the organization and what it stood for, but also that they believed adherence to collective security would be a viable security policy for their countries. In what follows reasons will be given for why these hopes proved misplaced.

One of the main reasons why collective security proved unworkable lays in a series of problems intrinsic to the formulation of collective security by the League of Nations. More specifically, in drafting the articles of the Covenant its architects had to reconcile internationalist principles and ideals with the preservation of national freedom of action: the resulting compromise was a legal document that proved weak in its binding power. Looking more closely at the formulation of Article 16 of the Covenant helps understand why the League proceeded as inconclusively as it did in its policy of economic sanctions towards Italy: 'Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants under Articles 12, 13, or 15, it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to [economic sanctions] It shall be the duty of the Council in such case to *recommend* to the several Governments concerned what [military measures to take]' [7] (my italics). Quoting article 16 at length shows the distinction drawn in the Covenant between economic sanctions and military action, and lack of stringent obligations as far as the latter are concerned. Crucially, as Dinstein argues, this formulation forbids one from speaking of a veritable collective security system [8].

An example of the internal failings of collective security as framed by the Covenant can also be found in the Manchurian crisis. As Northedge points out, the Covenant, like all other arrangements to preserve peace, had been designed with the First World War in mind. Its clauses were therefore apt for meeting the eventuality of traditional, officially-declared wars, but inapt for dealing with the kind of sudden, camouflaged attacks staged by both Italy and Japan [9].

The unworkability of collective security resulted from a second set of determinants beyond the problems specific to the formulation of the concept. From the day of the Japanese aggression in Manchuria on 18 September 1931 to the date of the establishment of Manchuguo as a puppet state under Japanese control in 1932, the major world powers were not able to react effectively to Japanese action. Part of what impaired them both in their resolve and in their concrete efforts was the financial and economic crisis that from 1929 brought them to their knees and diverted their attention and resources away from Manchuria and Ethiopia towards their national troubles. Just two days after the beginning of the Manchurian crisis Britain was forced to abandon the Gold Standard. The United States was also plagued by the economic depression, a situation which eroded the basis of congressional and public support that would have otherwise been available to Secretary of State Stimson [10], himself eager to get involved in the resolution of the Sino-Japanese dispute as per his own words in *The Far Eastern Crisis*: 'Japan's attack upon China in September, 1931, was of interest to the American people not only because it was an attack upon the fundamental basis of collective action [...] but because it was also a destructive assault upon the good relations which must exist among neighbour nations' [11]. France was also coping with domestic economic problems and was at any rate less well equipped to deter Japan than either Britain or the US would have been with their naval power endowment and presence in the East Asian region.

The financial crisis undermined the workability of collective security in at least two ways: it not only played a very large role in preventing the enforcement of collective security after the latter was challenged, as briefly outlined above, but it contributed heavily to bringing the challenge about. The serious economic distress produced by the crisis, and the further problems caused by the global wave of protectionism that ensued, created a fertile ground for the transformation of liberal societies into militaristic and fascist ones. Had Japan not been suffering from a substantial decrease in trade with both the US and China, the latter to the advantage of the US, especially due to a sharp fall in the price of silk on which its export-intensive economy relied heavily and through which many a Japanese peasant made a living, it is not clear that the militarists would have acquired as much power as they did.

In the case of the Italo-Abyssinian crisis, it can be hypothesised that the financial crisis and protectionism disrupted the system of economic interdependence that would have otherwise incentivized Mussolini not to risk antagonizing

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economic partners to pursue his aims in Africa. The crisis produced incentives for militarist, dictatorial regimes like Mussolini's to engage in expansionist ventures using propagandistic and demagogic arguments to divert popular attention away from domestic problems, which the crisis exacerbated, whilst mobilizing people by pointing at an external solution to such problems[12]. It is not the intention of this paper to reduce the changes in the internal political set up of Japan which gave strength and autonomy to the Kwantung army's initiatives in Manchuria to mere political economic pressures; nor is it its intention to argue that Italian imperialism was caused primarily by the financial crisis. However, the crisis substantiated the propagandistic, demagogic argument that the problems of Japan and Italy lay *abroad* and should be solved by acting forcefully abroad.

In the introduction, the third cause of the failure of peace by collective action has been anticipated as residing in a deep contradiction at the level of how major powers understood collective security. National security and other interests proved impossible to reconcile with the idea of collective security because national aims and ambitions, when not openly contradicting the principle of security for all by all, did not coincide with it. This gap provided the strongest disincentive from *embracing* collective security as an ideal and *enforcing* it as a practice. I shall begin my analysis of this disincentive by looking at the aggressors. Italy and Japan could hardly embrace the notion of collective security, despite both countries being signatories of the treaties and conventions that upheld the principle (most prominently the Treaty of Versailles, the Washington Treaties and the Pact of Paris). Collective security was framed in such a way that discouraged challenging the status quo and especially prohibited doing so in an aggressive manner. Although nominally in the circle of great powers, since the signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919 resentment had been mounting in both Italy and Japan over the second-class treatment they had received from Britain, France and the United States. Indeed, Italian and Japanese frustration did not merely stem from disregard of their concrete interests, but also from a more general sense of being treated as inferior: the non-inclusion of the racial equality clause in the League's Covenant and discriminatory immigration policies embittered Japan no less than more practical matters; in the same vein, the offence took by Orlando and the Italian delegation at Versailles weighed heavily in shaping a collective memory of victimization.

But it was not merely revisionism that made Italian and Japanese foreign policy incompatible with the principle of collective security: both countries were pursuing expansionist aims that, for how anachronistic, predated the outbreak of the Great War[13]. Another way to explain why the fact that Italy and Japan were signatories of several treaties renouncing war and promoting peace proved incongruous is to look at the role of war in both countries' political culture. As Baer explains, it was not Italy's colonial aspirations that Britain objected to but Italy's resolve to achieve them by war: what might have just been a case of imperial rivalry, or an African question, became a European and therefore international matter to be formally labelled as a challenge to collective security[14]. Yet it was precisely war that proved a non-negotiable part of Mussolini's aims in Ethiopia: 'War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy [...] the growth of empire, that is to say the expansion of the nation, is an essential manifestation of vitality, and its opposite a sign of decadence'[15].

The other major powers did not enforce collective security as a practice, whilst subscribing to it in theory and in words. French national priorities were such that the protection of the Chinese and Ethiopians only ranked beneath other concerns. In the case of the Manchurian crisis, the French were busy with surviving the impact of the financial crisis and did not see a dispute far off in the Asia as superseding much more pressing European economic and military security concerns. In the case of the Abyssinian crisis, the issue at the top of the French foreign policy agenda, i.e. maintaining the safeguard of a strong alliance against Hitler's Germany, dictated the French policy of accommodation and conciliation towards Italy which was embodied by the Hoare-Laval plan, devised in December 1935 by the British Foreign Secretary and the French Prime Minister as an alternative to the imposition of sanctions to Italy. As pointed out by Robertson, in the last resort the League's failure to save Ethiopia was caused as much by Hitler's occupation of the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland as by the Hoare-Laval negotiations and their publication[16].

Britain was the other architect of the Hoare-Laval plan, which attempted to accommodate Italian imperialist ambitions so as not to antagonize Rome whilst preserving French and British interests in Africa. The plan was for Britain an 'endeavour to evade its League commitments and to sacrifice Ethiopia on the altar of European security'[17]. As put rather poignantly by Haile Selassie in his second appeal to the League in 1936, 'Unhappily for Ethiopia [...] a certain

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Government considered that the European situation made it imperative at all costs to obtain the friendship of Italy. The price paid was the abandonment of Ethiopian independence to the greed of the Italian Government'[18]. Being France and England the pillars of the League of Nations, it is not surprising that the incongruity in their understanding of national versus collective and European versus collective security ultimately undermined the practical adherence of the League to its cardinal principles. As to the British stance during the Manchurian crisis, London saw it in its interest to go no further than to bandwagon with the US limited policy of non-recognition. As Northedge points out, it was only when British interests rather than Chinese interests were directly affected during the Shanghai crisis that Britain leaped into action, only to step back again once those narrow interests were secured[19].

Whereas European powers saw Manchuria as geographically remote, within the US, greater physical proximity translated in heightened concerns about regional stability. Despite the American isolationist stance in the interwar period, there was awareness at the level of government of the high stakes the US had on the developing East Asian balance of power and on the need to keep Japanese expansionist ambitions in check. In the end, however, the internal contradiction between this awareness and isolationism meant that US foreign policy was only tentative and inconclusive, with the lukewarm reaction of non-recognition of Manchuguo epitomizing this attitude. It was not mainly the financial crisis that limited US involvement in the Sino-Japanese dispute to the promotion of the 'non-recognition' doctrine: deeper reasons explain the American non-committal position, not least that the US was still in the process of defining the scope and content of its foreign policy interests and its role in the world. In the same vein, the US had enough stakes in the Abyssinian crisis to allow for its involvement, but not enough stakes to justify decisive action. As Braddick points out, the Italo-Ethiopian conflict per se did not threaten any substantial American interest, but the devotion of British and French attention and resources to this African/European dispute provided too tempting an opportunity for Japanese expansionism, and the latter problem directly concerned the United States[20]. Here, the US played at strengthening its alliance with Britain by backing London's foreign policy towards Italy as *aquid pro quo*, i.e. getting British support in keeping Japanese expansionism in check in return[21]. Whereas for France, Britain and the United States collective security merely episodically overlapped with their respective limited foreign policy priorities, German foreign policy interests were best served by the weakening of the world peace system. With its withdrawal from the League in 1933 and with the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, Hitler's Germany seriously undermined both the legitimacy and scope of action of the League by severely constraining the foreign policy options available to Britain and France, especially during the Abyssinian crisis.

This essay has provided three main explanations for the breakdown of collective security during and after the Manchurian and Abyssinian crises. Whilst all of these explanations are needed to make sense of the unworkability of collective security in the 1930s, the third cause has been presented as the weightiest in virtue of an existing hierarchy between the explanations provided. Weaknesses intrinsic in the formulation of collective security, whilst impairing the efficient application of the principles of the covenant, did not doom it to fail. I would argue that the loose formulation of collective security *did not so much prevent its efficient application, but rather allowed for its inefficient application*. Making this distinction is crucial in understanding the causality behind the failure of collective security: a loose formulation of the principle was a concomitant but not primary cause of its unworkability. In the same vein, reference to the financial crisis helps explaining the incentives for aggressors to challenge the concept of collective security and the reluctance of the other major powers to devote scarce resources to its defence, but this is only a superficial explanation. As mentioned in the essay, the lack of concrete proaction on the part of the major powers in defence of Chinese and Ethiopian interests was replaced by prompt mobilization when their perceived interests were directly at stake. This essay has therefore identified a third causal explanation as preeminent in explaining the failure of collective security, i.e. the opposition between collective security and specific national and regional security –and other, interests. This gap translated in an incentive to challenge collective security at worst, as in the case of the aggressors, and in a disincentive to embrace it as an ideal and enforce it as a practice at best, as in the case of the other major powers.

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Written by: Anna Costa
Written at: London School of Economics
Written for: Dr Felicia Yap
Date written: November 2010