

### 3. POST-INCIDENT DEVELOPMENTS

#### The Stimson Doctrine

Soon after the Liutiaogou Incident, China tendered a protest to the League of Nations. A few days later Japan issued its own declaration concerning the incident, which stated that Japan had no territorial ambitions whatsoever in Manchuria, and that Japan's only desire was for Japanese citizens to be able to reside and do business in Manchuria, in peace, in accordance with their legitimate rights. The pronouncement about Japan's having no territorial designs on Manchuria was sincere. Consider the fact that Japan could certainly have used its military might to annex Manchuria, had it wished to. However, it did not, instead establishing an independent state.

On September 30, 1931 the Council of the League of Nations issued a resolution that called for negotiation between Japan and China concerning the following:

1. Mutual declaration of non-aggressive policy or action in Manchuria.
2. Mutual engagements to suppress hostile agitation.
3. Reaffirmation by Japan as to the territorial integrity of China, including Manchuria.
4. Japanese subjects in Manchuria to be sufficiently protected by the Chinese when carrying on their peaceful and legitimate proceedings.
5. Arrangements to be reached between Japan and China for the prevention of ruinous railway competition and for the carrying into effect of existing railway agreements.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the independence movement in Manchuria was gaining momentum. In November all three eastern provinces severed ties with the Nanjing government.

In December the Japanese military began advancing into Jinzhou, the site of Zhang Xueliang's new government, and a strategic base for armed anti-Japanese activity. On January 3, 1932 they achieved a bloodless occupation of Jinzhou, whereupon Zhang's government vanished into thin air. US Secretary of State Henry Stimson's reaction was to send a note addressed to both Japan and China, dated January 7. An excerpt follows.

The American Government deems it to be its duty to notify both the Government of the Chinese Republic and the Imperial Japanese Government that it cannot admit the legality of any situation *de facto* nor does it intend to recognize any treaty or agreement entered into between those governments, or agents thereof, which may impair the treaty rights of the United States or its citizens in China, including those which 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, commonly known as the open door policy, and that it does not intend to recognize any situation, treaty or

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<sup>1</sup> US Office of the Historian, *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, Japan, 1931–1941, Volume I*, Document No. 23, Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Castle) of a Conversation with the Japanese Ambassador (Debuchi), October 14, 1931; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931-41v01/d23> (retrieved 03/2025).

agreement which may be brought about by means contrary to the covenants and obligations of the Pact of Paris of August 27, 1928.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the notorious Stimson Doctrine. Stimson was building on the “non-recognition” position taken by Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan in 1915, when Japan issued the Twenty-One Demands to China.

In its response to Stimson dated January 16, 1932, the Japanese government stated that “any replacement which has occurred in the personnel of the administration of Manchuria has been the necessary act of the local population.” It went on to say that during the Manchurian Incident, the majority of the Chinese officials in Manchuria and Mongolia took flight or resigned, thus destroying the government’s political functions. With a healthy dose of sarcasm, the drafters of the response added, “The Japanese Government cannot think that the Chinese people, unlike all others, are destitute of the power of self-determination and of organizing themselves in order to secure civilized conditions when deserted by the existing officials.”<sup>3</sup>

I have already alluded to the fact that American historian Charles Tansill pronounced Stimson’s non-recognition doctrine a “hand grenade that shattered all hope of peaceful relations between Japan and the United States.” And indeed, because of the Manchurian Incident, the relationship between Japan and the US did steadily worsen.

### **The birth of Manzhouguo**

January 28, 1932 marked the outbreak of the 1<sup>st</sup> Shanghai Incident. Meanwhile, in Manchuria, the nation-building process was steadily moving forward. On March 1 the government of Manzhouguo (the State of Manchuria) announced the launching of its administration, and on March 9, Puyi was installed as head of state (Emperor Xuantong).

During this time the League of Nations selected a Commission of Enquiry, which was assigned to conduct an onsite evaluation of the Manchurian Incident. The commission was headed by Lord Victor Bulwer-Lytton, Earl of Lytton; it subsequently became known as the Lytton Commission. The other four members were Count Luigi Aldrovandi Marescotti of Italy, Gen. Henri Claude of France, Maj.-Gen. Frank Ross McCoy of the US, and Dr. Heinrich Schnee of Germany. The commission members departed from Europe in early February 1932, and visited Japan, China proper, and Manchuria. At each destination they met with officials, as well as persons having some connection with the incident. The commission then prepared a report that enumerated its conclusions, which was made public on October 2 (the Lytton Report).

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<sup>2</sup> US Office of the Historian, *Foreign relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1932, The Far East*, Volume III, Telegram: the Secretary of State to the Consul General at Nanking (Peck), January 7, 1932; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1932v03/d10> (retrieved 04/2025).

<sup>3</sup> US Office of the Historian, Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, Japan, 1931–1941, Volume I, Document No. 58, Telegram from the Ambassador in Japan (Forbes) to the Secretary of State the Japanese Ambassador January 16, 1932; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931-41v01/d58> (retrieved 04/2025).

The establishment of Manzhouguo took place during the course of the Lytton Commission's evaluation. On September 15 Japan and Manzhouguo concluded the Japan-Manzhouguo Protocol, in which Japan recognized Manzhouguo. After stating that "Japan has recognized the fact that [Manchoukuo](#) [the spelling of the name in then-prevailing Wade-Giles romanization] in accordance with the free will of its inhabitants, has organized and established itself as an independent territory," the Protocol continues as follows:

1. Manchoukuo shall confirm and respect, in so far as no agreement to the contrary shall be made between Japan and Manchoukuo in the future, all rights and interests possessed by Japan or her subjects within the territory of Manchoukuo by virtue of Sino-Japanese treaties, agreements or other arrangements or Sino-Japanese contracts, private as well as public;
2. Japan and Manchoukuo, recognizing that any threat to the territory or to the peace and order of either of the High Contracting Parties constitutes at the same time a threat to the safety and existence of the other, agree to cooperate in the maintenance of their national security; it being understood that such Japanese forces as may be necessary for this purpose shall be stationed in Manchoukuo.<sup>4</sup>

From Japan's viewpoint, these two provisions of the Protocol had resolved the multitude of problems relating to Manchuria.

### **Japan withdraws from the League of Nations**

The League of Nations afforded the governments of both Japan and China an opportunity to air their opinions of the Lytton Report. The Japanese government submitted its observations, a 100-page-long document, to the League on November 18; it was made public on the following day. (On December 3, China presented its refutation of Japan's opinion and a speech delivered by Matsuoka Yōsuke, a diplomat who headed the Japanese delegation.)

In February 1933 the Council of the League of Nations recognized the sovereignty of China over Manchuria, on the basis of the Lytton Report, and issued a warning to Japan to withdraw its troops into the South Manchuria railway zone. The League recommended that Manchuria be administered by an international organization, and that order there kept by an international police force. When delegates were polled, there were 42 votes in favor of the report, one vote against (Japan), and one abstention (Siam). By that time Manzhouguo had been established and was flourishing. The Japanese fundamentally disagreed with the report's recommendations, and it was at this point that they bid farewell to the League of Nations.

When Matsuoka, who as head delegate, had announced Japan's withdrawal from the League, returned to Japan from Geneva, he was greeted with an unprecedented welcome. The newspapers extolled him as a "hero who, using independent diplomacy, fought valiantly for justice." Radio stations provided nationwide coverage of his arrival in Japan, as they would have the return of a

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<sup>4</sup> US Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1932, the Far East*, Volume IV, Document 271: The Japan-"Manchoukuo" Protocol of September 15, 1932; <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1932v04/d271>.

victorious general. The *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun* wrote, “The minister plenipotentiary conveyed Japan’s position, our mission in the Far East, and our national convictions, to the fullest, in an unrestrained and unapologetic manner.” We can easily imagine how public opinion of the time applauded and supported the Manchurian Incident.