China and Japan: 
An Analysis of Conflict

LEE W. FARNSWORTH*

I

Since the end of World War II there has been a constant series of conflicts involving both large and small nations. I propose here to analyze a conflict which occurred prior to this, hoping that it lies far enough in the past to allow perspective and objectivity, but not so far back that it becomes irrelevant to an understanding of current conflict. Obviously we need to know more about causes of conflict if we are ever to reduce it effectively, much as a scientist must discover the various microscopic viruses in order to successfully combat disease. Therefore, the basic purpose here is to bring to light certain political hypotheses of the causes of conflict in the search for principles or concepts that will at least indicate under what conditions international conflict will likely occur.

The analysis will be made on the basis of certain established principles of international politics: the sovereignty of nation-states; the problem of overlapping national interests, particularly as differentiated between vital and secondary interests; the manifestation of power as the major factor in international conflict; and the necessity to understand the law of change.

I have tried to show in this paper that conflict is more than the result of a specific incident which "insulted" a nation's honor: it includes a series of "causes." Unfortunately, there is also a series of "results." It is not exaggeration to say that the War in the Pacific, the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and the current crisis in Southeast Asia are only some of the results of the conflict under study. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara has so aptly said, wars only give us time to determine how to avoid future wars.

*Dr. Farnsworth is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University and Director of the new Asian Research Institute.
A survey of the traditional relations of East Asia will show that China has long been on the defensive, with demands always directed inward. Now, paradoxically, that great nation is reversing history.

*China and the Powers*

Beginning with Russia in the mid-Seventeenth Century, demands for treaties and trade were made upon China. Her response was haughty and weak. Great Britain led off the ensuing assaults in the Opium War, which resulted in the series of unequal treaties which the Celestial Kingdom was forced to accept. These treaties were to seriously infringe upon Chinese sovereignty by forcing the opening of ports, ceding territory (Hong Kong), charging indemnities, controlling tariffs, establishing extraterritoriality, and yielding special Western enclaves and spheres of interest. The more rights and privileges given, the more need of Western power to protect those rights.

By 1900, the Germans had mining and railway concessions in Shantung; the Russians were building railways from Siberia to Manchuria; the French were working mines in Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and Yunnan, and were building a railroad towards these provinces through China's former vassal-state of Indo-China; the British had leased Weihaiwei and Kowloon and had issued a warning that the Yangtze valley was her special area of interest; and the Americans were preparing the first note on the Open Door policy.

*Japan and the Powers*

Like China's, Japan's first modern contact with the West resulted in a forced acceptance of an unequal treaty. After more than two centuries of isolation, Commodore Perry's Black Ships in 1854 convinced Japan of the efficacy of opening up limited trade and coaling stations.

Whereas China had rejected Western technological advances, Japan adopted them in conformity with the Charter Oath of 1868 proclaimed by the young Emperor Meiji that "knowledge and learning shall be sought for throughout the world in order to establish the foundation of the Empire." Japanese missions soon began to spread throughout the world in search of new ways and techniques to strengthen the polity of Japan.
Japan was soon dissatisfied with being the unequal partner and sought revision of the treaties. Although the United States was sympathetic, it was only the British who could lead the way, which they did only in 1894 after being satisfied that Japan had modernized her legal codes and courts.

These events were humiliating and degrading to Japan. She had been bombarded by punitive squadrons, missionaries had been forced on her, and her own concessions won from China had been wrested from her, only to fall into the hands of Russia a few years later. These conditions in Japan (and eventually in China) were bound to bring forth a national reaction among a people who had so recently seen themselves as a nation for the first time. As Japan’s relations with China are surveyed, it will become obvious where these anxieties thus produced were to be directed.

*China and Japan*

In 1871 Japan became the first Asian power to enter into a treaty with China. The treaty of peace and amity gave Japan commercial rights in part similar to those enjoyed by Westerners. Japan was not only no longer a vassal to the Middle Kingdom; she even obtained a greatly modified form of extraterritoriality, although she failed to obtain the usual, for Western nations, most-favored nation clause. Japan was on her way to demonstrating her equality, albeit at the expense of China.

In the next three decades Japan intensified this drive for equality. In 1874 a punitive mission was sent to Formosa because of the murder of several Okinawan sailors by aborigines. This mission not only challenged China’s sovereign claim on Formosa, but also asserted Japan’s protective sovereignty over Okinawa and the Ryukyus, previously considered as under the suzerainty of China. In 1876 Japan recognized another Chinese vassal-state, Korea, as an independent state with the “same sovereign rights” as those of Japan.

In the 1880’s Japan imposed Western-style indemnities on Korea for Japanese deaths in that country. In 1894, one week after the signing of the equality treaty with Great Britain, Japanese seized the royal palace in Seoul and overthrew the government of the king. The result was war with China.

The Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed April 17, 1895, and included indemnities and land concessions. Although a tri-
partite intervention of Russia, Germany, and France forced Japan to return the Liaotung peninsula to China (only to be taken by Russia in 1898), Japan had manifest her equality with the West by humiliating the giant of Asia.

*China in the Early Twentieth Century*

The patterns established in the Nineteenth Century continued into the Twentieth. The treaty powers, having carved China into their respective spheres of interest, now sought to stabilize the status quo by proclaiming through the United States that China's territorial and administrative integrity must be protected, and declared the Open Door to be the guiding principle for "equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese Empire."

The Japanese were not satisfied with the status quo, however, and after joining in a treaty of alliance with the mighty Great Britain in 1902, proceeded to attack and defeat Russia in 1904, obtaining her spheres of interest in North China, Manchuria, and North Korea. Furthermore, Japan having annexed Korea in 1910 now saw herself not only as equal with the West in China, but as having a pre-eminent interest. The Japanese political scientist Masamichi Royama wrote that although Japan cooperated generally with the Western powers, "it was nevertheless tacitly understood by the majority of the Japanese people that she had special relations with the Asiatic continent, upon which she depended for her economic security and future prosperity, no matter what policies the Western powers might pursue."

Japan's vital interests on the mainland—for relief of population pressures, obtaining raw materials, and satisfying a growing power drive—reached its first peak in the Twenty-One Demands of January 18, 1915. Had China accepted these demands *in toto*, it would have meant the yielding of sovereignty to Japan. As it was, China agreed wholly to nine of the demands, partially to five, and rejected seven. This particularly strengthened Japan's influence and control of Northeast China and Manchuria.

A contemporary Japanese apologist pointed out that Japan's sphere of interest was minute compared to others. He argued that the lessons of imperialism were learned from the West:

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Remember that it was not Japan that originated the idea of sphere of interest. It was because European powers were bent upon dividing China into so many spheres of influence that Japan was obliged to step in and take such measures as might be necessary to safeguard her position in the Far East that might arise from the unhappy condition of China.\(^5\)

Kawakami was especially biting towards the protests from the United States and the American people:

The trouble with the average American is that he permits the non-essential details of Japan's recent diplomatic negotiations with China to obscure the main point upon which Japan's policy hinges. That point is her desire to become the dominant factor in the molding of China's destiny. Call it an Asiatic super-Monroe Doctrine if you will. The name is immaterial. The important thing is that Japan, the only Asiatic nation efficient enough to escape the yoke of European domination, is aspiring to the leadership of other Asiatic nations. To me this is a laudable ambition, with which America, whose traditional policy has been to keep Europe at arm's length, must sympathize. Once this point is frankly conceded, even the apparently obnoxious Group V of the Japanese Demands is easily understood.\(^6\)

Though there were protests from the West in response to cries for relief from the Chinese government, none were more than moralistic utterances. America's Open Door policy apparently was the same because Acting Secretary of State Lansing informed the American legation in Peking in 1914 that "it would be quixotic in the extreme to allow the question of China's territorial integrity to entangle the United States in international difficulties."\(^7\)

In the 1920's the Japanese yielded most of the privileges thus won back to China in return for international recognition as a world power. Included in the various treaties signed by Japan and the West were guarantees of China's sovereignty similar to those of the earlier Open Door Notes. Japan also joined in signing the ill-fated Pact of Paris which renounced war as an instrument of policy. In this case, however, Japan

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took special note that Manchuria was within its sphere of defense and was still a vital interest.\(^5\)

*Asia and the West in the Twentieth Century*

Although the early Twentieth Century seemed to be moving from a state of tension to a period of calm, there were unseen but dangerous currents which more than offset the possibility that the utopian hopes of the "decade of treaties" would reach fruition. Chief among these was the reaction of the Western nations, notably that of the land of freedom and equality, the United States, to the immigration of Orientals.

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Acts, continuing through the head tax on Chinese in California (declared unconstitutional) and the sharp limitations of Japanese by Washington and California legislatures, and culminating in the 1924 Exclusion Acts, the policies were ill-designed to promote international conciliation. A Japanese scholar later noted that Japan had accepted its responsibilities in the Washington treaties while the United States responded with the Exclusion Acts. "No act on the part of a foreign Power could have given a stronger argument to Japanese conservatives for continental expansion."\(^6\) These same treaties were used later by the militarists as proof of the inability of civilian government to exercise sound judgment in protecting Japan's vital interests.

As if a portent of the future, despite the fact Japan was now showing greater respect for the growing independence of China, the failure of the Japanese government to send troops to defend her citizens at Nanking during an uprising there in 1927 led to the collapse of the General Baron Tanaka cabinet, even though no foreigners, including Japanese, were injured at that time. The successor government did not fare much better, although it did carry out a more "positive" policy towards China. In 1928, the Manchurian warlord, Chang Tsolin, who was considered to be a puppet for Japanese ambitions, bolted to the Nationalist Chinese when he failed to receive Japanese aid in expeditions against the Nationalists. Whereupon, the Japanese "young officers" in Manchuria plotted Chang Tso-lin's death, hoping his son, Chang Hsueh-liang would be more amenable to control; he was not. A crisis re-

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\(^5\) Royama, p. 55.

sulted in Tsinan in North China and on April 19, 1928, Japanese troops landed there to protect Japanese property and residents, and to keep Chiang Kai-shek from the void of power which would be "detrimental to Japan's interests there." The liberals in Japan were incensed that the Japanese were risking a fight against the Chinese Nationalist army "for the sake of some remote apprehension about her future position in Manchuria." With the withdrawal of the troops on May 2, 1929, it was only a short time before the government fell again under conservative pressure.

The new Chinese government further alienated the Japanese with a new tariff schedule which imposed heavy duties on Japanese goods. "Under these circumstances," reported Takeuchi, "liberal elements found it extremely difficult to convince the people whose lot was becoming progressively worse, that continuation of a liberal policy would be beneficial to the country." The world depression made Japan's Chinese investments even more vital to her economic survival. By 1931 her investments in China were second only to those of Great Britain, but by percentage there was no comparison: as a percentage of total overseas investments British investments in China were 5.9 percent, whereas those of Japan represented 81.9 percent.

III

Japan as a Participant in Conflict

The strict Japanese hierarchical relationships were such that they could cause the nation to succumb to conflict caused by a few well-placed leaders. There is a proper station for each person in the society and respecting that condition is what brings social tranquility. This requires a high degree of discipline and loyalty, particularly in relation to the Emperor who had become the focal point of all loyalty. Ruth Benedict, in her classical study of Japanese culture, pointed out how the hierarchical system was transferred to international relations by the Japanese government's practice of introducing international notes with the idea that the basic aim of her policy was

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"Royama, p. 43.
"Ibid.
"Takeuchi, p. 188.
""Ibid."
to enable "each nation to find its proper place in the world." 11
In the hierarchy, China had strangely enough become the
backward young brother who needed assistance in finding his
proper station.

We have already seen that economically Japan's need for
sources of raw materials for industry and markets for finished
goods made the loss of these sources dangerous for her eco-
nomic survival. Takeuchi says that the high tariffs of the West
(33.3% in "free trade" Great Britain and 41.5% in the United
States) gave rise "to a new feeling of despiration among
Japanese in their struggle for civilized existence. Herein lies
the basic cause for Japan's expansionist tendency." 12

Within Japan a number of patriotic societies, such as the
Amur River Society (erroneously called the Black Dragon
Society), whose name indicates the demand to extend Japan-
ese influence into North China, came into being. The fanati-
cism of these societies increased to such an extent that it led in
November 1930 to the shooting of a Prime Minister (he died
eight months later). On May 15, 1932, another Prime Minister
was assassinated, bringing to an end the few and futile years
of party government. In 1936 more assassinations were carried
out, and the criminals became national heroes because their acts
were intended solely to protest the place of Japan and its
Emperor.

A final factor in Japan's warmaking potential was her image
of China. The official image of China, as depicted by
the Chief Delegate to the League of Nations, was that al-
though Japan had in 1922 envisioned a peaceful and unified
China, the China of 1932 was one of "disunion" and "an-
archy" with the militarist struggles threatening the core of
China itself. "Communism," he declared, "has deeply ent-
trenched itself in the heart of the country," and, "the habit of
civil strife has become engrained and endemic." As for the
people, they "are misled, much terrorized and much misrepre-
sented," and "their main desire is to enjoy in peace and quiet
the results of their industry." 13 The conclusion reached by the

11Ruth Benedict, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (New York: Hough-
ton-Mifflin Co., 1946), p. 44. This is an excerpt from the note to the United
States of December 7, 1941.
12Takeuchi, pp. 184-85.
13Japan, Delegation to the League of Nations, The Manchurian Question
Japanese was that China was badly in need of an elder brother to help straighten out her internal confusion.

**China as a Participant in Conflict**

The conditions in China, though more unsettled, were not quite as complex as those in Japan. It is certain, however, that levels of tension capable of producing external conflict were present, albeit in a rather negative sense.

After centuries of a stereotyped form of Confucianism, with its ancient and rigid patterns of social relationships, China was in a woeful condition of upheaval following the coming of the West. The adjustments from archaic ideas to a modern view of the world and practical education was slow and painful. With the fall of the last dynasty in 1911, control of the country degenerated into two rival governments and numerous areas controlled by warlords. The people were not sure of any authority except that of the family, and the various movements toward national unity received little grassroots support.

In spite of the efforts of Sun Yat-sen, Yuan Shih-k'ai, and Chiang Kai-shek, "the plight of the peasantry in the decade after 1915 became so wretched that a truly revolutionary atmosphere was developing in the countryside." The Nationalist triumph eventually brought a modicum of control and a few reforms, but it could not gain full control, especially through democratic means, and was forced to establish a tutory government. The Nationalist Party, established on communist party lines, thanks to the Soviet advisers to Sun Yat-sen, became the basic decision-making organ. Still the internal political structure remained so corrupt and weak as to almost invite interference.

Militarily, the prime aim of Chiang was to suppress the communist soviet areas of China while dealing diplomatically with Japan over North China and Manchuria. Perhaps this was all he could do. The Lytton Commission, which investigated Japan's attack on Manchuria, reported that the local army in Manchuria was generally independent of Nanking and its officers controlled all public offices. "Nepotism, corruption, and maladministration continued to be the unavoidable consequences of the state of affairs . . . . This state of affairs, however, was not peculiar to Manchuria, as similar or even

worse conditions existed in other parts of China."¹⁵ Even Chiang, undoubtedly in an effort to arouse his people, noted in 1934 that from the standpoint of military preparedness "we are not fit to be called a modern state."¹⁶ Furthermore, he cited Mencius' wisdom that "a kingdom must first smite itself, and then others will smite it," in warning that further weakening of China would invite further external encroachment.¹⁷

As for the image of the opponent, it was ambivalent. On the one hand, China saw Japan as a barbaric and uncivilized upstart challenging a superior in the hierarchy of nations. On the other hand, the Chinese also viewed Japan as a progressive Oriental nation successfully countering the Western imperialists. As one Chinese writer noted, Japan is like "a man who has made a lot of money in a short time, but does not know how to spend it." Yes, Japan has built up vast organizations, he asserts, and because of this she "claims the right to be considered among the first rank of civilized nations." But, he concludes, "Japan today is not civilized—she is merely 'mechanized'. . . ."¹⁸

IV

The Beginning of Conflict

In the spring of 1931 a Captain Nakamura of the Japanese Army wandered into Inner Mongolia from Manchuria. He was dressed as a civilian and apparently carried documents variously identifying himself as a doctor, a commercial trader and a soldier. Nakamura managed to get himself killed in a small village, apparently over a gambling debt. Japan immediately demanded both justice and honor. The Chinese were slow and evasive, but finally met the demands of the Japanese on September 17, 1931.¹⁹

The following night, despite these actions of the Chinese, the Japanese military machine went into action, and with a minimum of resistance occupied the city of Mukden and half a dozen other strategic points in south Manchuria—a move

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¹⁷Chiang Kai-shek, China's Foreign Relations (Nanking: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1935), pp. 4-5.
which even surprised the Tokyo government, which had been pursuing a policy of conciliatory diplomacy. Faced with a fait accompli, however, the government could do nothing except publicly support the move, "while privately struggling to regain control of the destiny of Japan." 20

The spark that ignited the conflagration was an explosion which cracked the fishplate at the junction of two rails on the South Manchurian Railway—damage so slight as not to even slow down a train passing the spot shortly afterward. 21

By January of 1932, Japan had advanced to the Great Wall and controlled more than half of Manchuria and had attacked Shanghai as a result of anti-Japanese riots and boycotts there, killing thousands of Chinese. Manchoukuo, under the ex-Emperor Henry Pu Yi, had been proclaimed in Manchuria. 22

This pattern of an attack following almost impossible demands continued through the entire period of 1931-37, finally escalating from the level of "incidents" to all out war.

Claims and Demands

Japan claimed at the League of Nations that chaos in China was "endangering international relations." Japan's actions were to "prevent the development of war," and were "therefore in conformity with the League of Nations." 23 Furthermore, Japan had "a special position" in China as a result of "exceptional treaty rights" plus "the natural consequences which flow from her close neighborhood and geographical situation and from her historical associations." Although Japan still did not have "a general and vexatious right of intervention" it did have a position "in which she must defend herself with uncommon energy against military attack." 24 The Japanese delegation pointed out how even the Lytton Commission had admitted Japan's vital interests in Manchuria when it reported:

There is probably nowhere in the world an exact parallel to this situation, no example of a country enjoying in the

20Ibid., p. 13.
21Ibid.
22Interestingly enough, Japan waited nearly a year before recognizing the new puppet regime, probably in anticipation of another nation leading the way.
23Japan, Delegation to the League of Nations, p. 7.
24Ibid., p. 30.
territory of a neighbouring State such extensive economic and administrative privileges.\textsuperscript{25}

When someone suggested that there be a measure of international control over Manchuria, the Japanese made it clear that this was contrary to their vital interest.

In this connection, let me state clearly once and for all, that the Japanese people will, for reasons too patent for me to feel necessary to explain, oppose any such attempt in Manchuria. You can be sure of that. We do not mean to defy the world at all; it is only our right.\textsuperscript{26}

Japan claimed, even after occupying Canton, that her desire to establish a "New Order in Asia" was based on the firm conviction that it, and it alone, "will offer the real solution for the age-long problem: independent, strong and prosperous China."\textsuperscript{27}

China, for her part, merely demanded that there be no violation of her sovereignty, with economic cooperation "based upon the principles of equality and reciprocity," according to Chiang, who was willing to acknowledge Japan's natural interest in Manchuria. "What we have been striving for incessantly is nothing more than our existence as a nation and co-existence with other countries in the family of nations."\textsuperscript{28}

The growing attacks of Japan led to a brief unification of China to "Resist Japan and Save the Country." Japan countered by sending more troops into North China, resulting in the Chinese announcement to the world that its vital interests were still being violated and further appeasement was at an end. Chiang is quoted as follows:

The safety of Lukouchiao is a problem involving the existence of the nation as a whole, whether the incident can be amicably settled comes within the comprehension of the term "limit of endurance..." If we abandon as much as an inch of our territory to the invaders without attempting to defend it, then we shall be guilty of an unpardonable sin against our race.\textsuperscript{29}

\section{V}

It is recognized that part of the failure to deter conflict was the failure of the available international machinery to

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 13.
\textsuperscript{27}Royama, p. xi.
\textsuperscript{28}Chiang, pp. 6-8.
\textsuperscript{29}Royama, p. 117.
uphold its covenant to protect nations from unprovoked attack, and Japan warned that she would violently oppose any attempt to do so. The roots of the conflict, however, are found elsewhere.

National pride of Japan had much to do with Japan’s attacks. Exclusion acts in both the United States and Australia led Professor Takeuchi to remark:

>You have closed all doors to our men and goods elsewhere and yet insist on the Open Door only in China. We have a population that is increasing at the rate of nearly one million a year, and they must be fed... Rightly or wrongly the Japanese people are not convinced that the world has been fair with them.\footnote{Takeuchi, pp. 190-91.}

Japan as a sovereign nation was unwilling to allow international interference in her desire to protect what she viewed as her vital interests. She exerted her power to do so and, not meeting resistance, continued on the road to conquest.

China also sensed that her vital interests were in jeopardy from Japan, but lacking sufficient power had to appease Japan’s demands, who in turn exerted more power to make the position even more secure.

Just as Japan had announced her intent to fight for her vital interests, so China also had to fight eventually or lose her sovereignty and nationhood. Clearly, the vital interests of China and Japan had come into conflict and war was the inevitable result. Japan knew the consequences, because each time she made a demand which violated China’s vital interests reinforcements were usually on the way. All of the sugar-coated moral underpinnings of saving China and arranging the hierarchy of nations in true perspective, could not hide the fact that Japan was committing aggression.

Finally, there was widespread neglect of the law of change. The West failed to recognize until too late how powerful Japan had become and how interdependent economically the world had become, despite depression. It further failed to realize the dangers of racial discrimination in international relations.

Both Japan and the West failed to recognize the changes that were going on within China. The new noises of nation-
alism and desire for international recognition, so recently heard in Japan itself, were ignored as if they were mere impolite stomach rumblings. Japan was thirty years too late as far as accomplishing her ends in China were concerned.

The contest was inevitable, as was the eventual outcome. The conflict was a real education to the world, but as is so often the case, the lessons have not been remembered. International organization is still only a facade behind which the sovereign states vie for position with their power. The law of change is consistently ignored and challenges of overlapping vital interests are everywhere upon us. We wonder if another broken rail can be the "cause" of another conflict in a day when the arsenals of nations contain nuclear weapons—weapons which the awakened giant, so recently abused, now possesses.