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POLITICAL RELATIONS AND CONFLICT BETWEEN REPUBLICAN CHINA AND IMPERIAL JAPAN, 1930-1939: RECORDS OF THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT



The records in this collection relate to political relations between China and Japan for the period 1930 -1939. The records are mostly instructions to and despatches from diplomatic and consular officials; the despatches are often accompanied by enclosures. Also included in these records are notes between the Department of State and foreign diplomatic representatives in the United States, memorandums prepared by officials of the Department. There are records on: the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, beginning with the Mukden incident, in 1931; military action at Shanghai in 1932; further Japanese political and economic penetration into China, 1935-1936; and the course of the undeclared war between Japan and China, 1937-1939.

Date Range: 1930-1939

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Detailed Description:

The Nationalist-Communist turmoil in China provided an easy opportunity for Japan to further its goals in the 1930s. Japan saw Manchuria as a limitless supply of raw materials, a market for her manufactured goods (now excluded from many Western countries by Depression era tariffs), and as a protective buffer state against the Soviet Union in Siberia. Japan invaded Manchuria outright after the Mukden Incident in September 1931. After five months of fighting, the puppet state of Manchukuo was established in 1932, with the last emperor of China, Pu Yi, installed as a puppet ruler. Militarily too weak to directly challenge Japan, China appealed to the League of Nations for help. The League's investigation was published as the Lytton Report, condemning Japan for its incursion into Manchuria, and causing Japan to withdraw from the League of Nations entirely. Appeasement being the predominant policy of the day, no country was willing to take action against Japan beyond tepid censure.

Incessant fighting followed the Mukden Incident. In 1932, Chinese and Japanese troops fought a short war in the January 28 Incident. This battle resulted in the demilitarization of

Shanghai, which forbade the Chinese from deploying troops in their own city. In Manchukuo there was an ongoing campaign to defeat the anti-Japanese volunteer armies that arose from widespread outrage over the policy of non-resistance to Japan.

In 1933, the Japanese attacked the Great Wall region, the Tanggu Truce taking place in its aftermath, giving Japan control of Jehol province as well as a demilitarized zone between the Great Wall and Peking-Tientsin region. Here the Japanese aim was to create another buffer region, this time between Manchukuo and the Chinese Nationalist government in Nanking.

Japan increasingly used internal conflict in China to reduce the strength of her fractious opponents. This was precipitated by the fact that even years after the Northern Expedition, the political power of the Nationalist government was limited to just the area of the Yangtze River Delta. Other sections of China were essentially in the hands of local Chinese warlords. Japan sought various Chinese collaborators and helped them establish governments friendly to Japan. This policy was called the Specialization of North China, more commonly known as the North China Autonomous Movement. The northern provinces affected by this policy were Chahar, Suiyuan, Hopeh, Shansi, and Shantung.

This Japanese policy was most effective in the area of what is now Inner Mongolia and Hopeh. In 1935, under Japanese pressure, China signed the He-Umezu Agreement, which forbade the KMT from conducting party operations in Hopeh. In the same year, the Chin-Doihara Agreement was signed expelling the KMT from Chahar. Thus, by the end of 1935 the Chinese government had essentially abandoned northern China. In its place, the Japanese-backed East Hopeh Autonomous Council and the Hopeh-Chahar Political Council were established. There in the empty space of Chahar the Mongol Military Government was formed on May 12, 1936, Japan providing all necessary military and economic aid. Afterwards Chinese volunteer forces continued to resist Japanese aggression in Manchuria, and Chahar and Suiyuan.

Most historians place the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War on July 7, 1937 at the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, when a crucial access point to Peking was assaulted by the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). Because the Chinese defenders were the poorly equipped infantry divisions of the former Northwest Army, the Japanese easily captured Peking and Tientsin.

The Imperial General Headquarters (GHQ) in Tokyo were initially reluctant to escalate the conflict into full scale war, being content with the victories achieved in northern China following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. However, the KMT central government determined that the "breaking point" of Japanese aggression had been reached and Chiang Kai-shek quickly mobilized the central government army and air force under his direct command to attack the Japanese Marines in Shanghai on August 13, 1937, which led to the Battle of Shanghai. The IJA had to mobilize over 200,000 troops, coupled with numerous naval vessels and aircraft to capture Shanghai after more than three months of intense fighting, with casualties far exceeding initial expectations.

Building on the hard won victory in Shanghai, the IJA captured the KMT capital city of Nanking and Northern Shansi by the end of 1937, in campaigns involving approximately 350,000 Japanese soldiers, and considerably more Chinese. Historians estimate up to 300,000 Chinese were mass murdered in the Nanking Massacre (also known as the "Rape of Nanking"), after the fall of Nanking on December 13, 1937, while some Japanese deny the existence of a massacre.

At the start of 1938, the Headquarters in Tokyo still hoped to limit the scope of the conflict to occupying areas around Shanghai, Nanking and most of northern China. They thought this would preserve strength for an anticipated showdown with the Soviet Union, but by now the Japanese government and GHQ had effectively lost control of the Japanese army in China. With many victories achieved, Japanese field generals escalated the war and finally met with defeat at Taierzhuang. Afterwards the IJA had to change its strategy and deploy almost all of its armies in the attack on the city of Wuhan, which by now was the political, economic and military center of China, in hopes of destroying the fighting strength of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) and forcing the KMT government to negotiate for peace. But after the Japanese capture of the city of Wuhan on October 27, 1938, the KMT was forced to retreat to Chungking to set up a provisional capital, with Chiang Kai-shek still refusing to negotiate unless Japan agreed to withdraw to her pre-1937 borders.

With Japanese casualties and costs mounting, the Imperial General Headquarters decided to retaliate by ordering the air force of the navy and the army to launch the war's first massive air raids on civilian targets in the provisional capital of Chungking and nearly every major city in unoccupied China, leaving millions dead, injured and homeless.

From the beginning of 1939 the war entered a new phase with the unprecedented defeat of the Japanese at Changsha and Kwangsi. These outcomes encouraged the Chinese to launch its first large-scale counter-offensive against the IJA in early 1940. However, due to its low military-industrial capacity and limited experience in modern warfare, the NRA was defeated in this offensive. Afterwards Chiang could not risk any more all-out offensive campaigns given the poorly trained, under-equipped, and disorganized state of his armies and opposition to his leadership both within the Kuomintang and in China in general. He had lost a substantial portion of his best trained and equipped men in the Battle of Shanghai and was at times at the mercy of his generals, who maintained a high degree of autonomy from the central KMT government.

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Source: RG 59, Records of the U.S. State Department, Central Classified Files, 1930-1939, decimal number 793.94 (Political Relations between China and Japan), National Archives, College Park, MD.