Special Address

Multilateral Relations and Security Crises in the 1930s

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The international situation in the 1930s differed fundamentally from the situation before 1914. In the years before World War I, the European system of states and empires was dominated by fixed alliances between the major powers: France, Britain, and Russia on the one hand, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy on the other. It is usually argued that the alliances played a major part in turning a bilateral conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia into a European and world war. In the 1930s, however, there was no fixed alliance system that committed states to provide each other with military assistance until the very eve of war in 1939. Yet a second world war was the result. Multilateral relations in the face of crisis remained unstable, divided, and unpredictable. Cooperation was possible but limited by the circumstances of a rapidly changing international context.

At the end of World War I, the victor powers were determined to create an international institutional structure that would prevent further wars from happening. The League of Nations, established under covenant in 1919, was supposed to maintain the peace through the practice of 'collective security'. The Covenant stated that the 'League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations.'[1] Although American and French leaders hoped that the League might thus use military force to restrain an aggressor, British resistance to the idea meant that the covenant provided only for economic sanctions as the principal instrument for League coercion. It was assumed by those who drafted the covenant that economic pressure exerted through 'absolute isolation', amounting, in President Woodrow Wilson's words, to 'something more tremendous than war' would be a sufficient deterrent to any state contemplating aggression.[2] Wilson failed to get the United States to join the League, and it was dominated from the outset by the two major global powers, Britain and France. Collective security was imposed in the 1920s in a few minor cases, chiefly through pressure from the British and French governments, but the principle was not subject to any severe test until the 1930s. The idealism expressed in the idea of collective security was matched by the idea of international disarmament which it was hoped would make it less likely that states would again choose to go to war.

The League by the 1930s had achieved much on the technical side with programmes on controlling the drugs trade, helping refugees, developing healthcare, and combating slave-labour, but the ambition to end war faced major constraints. Although the League was a multilateral organisation, it was not an alliance of its members, who were all expected voluntarily to respect the terms of the covenant. Nor did the League have any real power to enforce a decision on a recalcitrant member beyond economic sanctions, whose status and practice were never clearly defined. For much of the League's existence important states were not members, which made the weapon of sanctions less effective. There was no League military force, unlike the current United Nations. An international army or an international air force organised by the League were ideas regularly raised in discussion about how to keep the peace but without success, because no major state wanted its armed forces outside its direct control. [3]The

[1] Cherri Wemlinger, 'Collective Security and the Italo-Ethiopian Dispute before the League of Nations', *Peace and Change*, 40/2 (2015), 144.

[2] Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2022), 1-4; Deepak Mawar, *States Undermining International Law: The League of Nations, United Nations, and Failed Utopianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 97-101.

[3] Waqar Zaidi, ' "Aviation Will Either Destroy or Save Our Civilization": Proposals for the International Control of

major powers, both inside and outside the League, continued to pursue their own state interests through regional pacts and bilateral treaties independent of the internationalist ambitions of the League. Though disarmament could be enforced on the defeated states after 1919, for other states it had to be voluntary. When an international Disarmament Conference finally convened in 1932 it achieved almost nothing because no major state was willing to put its own security at risk. These weaknesses were all exposed when the League had to confront the first major crises in the 1930s, first the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, then the Italian war against Ethiopia in 1935-6, and finally the German violation of the terms of the Versailles peace settlement.

The Japanese action in Manchuria ought under the terms of the covenant to have been referred to the League and a decision on sanctions taken. China asked the League to invoke arbitration, but to no effect. A League Commission was appointed to report on the situation, but although the League assembly finally condemned Japanese action in February 1933 following the Commission's report, the British and French governments were anxious not to confront Japan and endanger commercial interests in Asia, placing self-interest before the multilateral interests of the League. The implicit accusation of aggression contained in the final League report was enough to prompt the Japanese government to give notice in March 1933 that Japan would quit the organisation. In explaining this decision, the foreign minister Matsuoka Yōsuke explained that 'We had to promote the security of our position and the peace of the Far East. We cannot permit the danger of communism to spread farther into any part of our sphere of the world'. The withdrawal further weakened the League's influence in East Asia, although the last Japanese delegates, working for the Mandates Commission, were not fully withdrawn until November 1938. [4] China hoped to be able to take Japan's place on the League Council, but failure to pay the obligatory dues to the League in the 1920s spoke against the claim. Chiang Kai-shek was alienated by the failure to act over Manchuria, and distrustful of the League as an instrument for Western intervention, so that the crisis in East Asia became increasingly distant from the League's orbit. [5]

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia, however, saw the League try to exert what power it had, first to avert war, then to end it once Italy had invaded. As a serious border dispute developed between the Italian Empire and Ethiopia in the course of 1935, the League was inundated with petitions for taking action to arbitrate between the two states, one of which, Italy, was a permanent member of the League Council. The Council first directed in August 1935 that both sides accept arbitration and conciliation. Italy refused. When Italy invaded in early October, the Council set up a committee of six to define who was the aggressor. Italy was named on 7 October, and on 11 October delegates from 51 countries voted for economic sanctions. Limited restrictions on trade with Italy began to operate from 18 November. [6] Once again, League action was undermined by British and French politicians, who hoped to broker an agreement outside the framework of the League. The British foreign minister, Samual Hoare, and the French prime minister, Pierre Laval, reached a secret agreement that Mussolini could be offered control of specific areas of Ethiopian territory, but when the agreement was leaked, prompting popular protest, both governments had to reject the idea. Yet when Italy declared the

Aviation, 1920-1945', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), 155-9.

[4] Susan Pederson, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 290; Thomas Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914-1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 165-72, 177.

[5] Harumi Goto-Shibata, *The League of Nations and the East Asian Imperial Order, 1920-1946* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 6-9.

[6] Wemlinger, 'Collective Security', 139-40, 144-8; Manwar, *States Undermining International Law*, 150-3.

annexation of Ethiopia in May 1936, League sanctions were ended. The failure to prevent Italy's war undermined fatally the credibility of collective security, which was not invoked again when Germany annexed Austria and dismembered Czechoslovakia. Sanctions had been difficult to enforce given that two major powers, Germany and Japan had left the League, and the United States was not a League member. A year later, Italy left the League, leaving only Britain, France, and the Soviet Union as permanent Council members.

While the crises in the mid-1930s unfolded, the Soviet Union attempted to bolster the idea of multilateral co-operation to avert war. In the late 1920s, the Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, had proposed the abolition of armies and all existing weapons, and at the Disarmament Conference in 1932 drew up the so-called Litvinov-Politis Convention defining aggression in international relations, a convention that got little support. In December 1933, the Politburo in Moscow decided to pursue a strategy of 'collective security' to replace the ideal of peaceful co-existence that had emerged in Soviet foreign policy in the late 1920s. In 1934 the Soviet Union agreed to join the League on condition that it enjoyed a permanent seat on the League Council, which it was granted.[7] Collective security became one of the slogans of Comintern and a regular ambition of left-wing movements in Europe, which argued that collaboration with the Soviet Union was the key to European peace and a challenge to the spread of fascism. This differed from the League commitment to collective security, because the Soviet Union hoped to achieve firm pacts that guaranteed military cooperation, reminiscent of the alliance structure before 1914.

The closest the Soviet Union came to an alliance was a pact for mutual support signed with France in May 1935, but it contained no provision for military staff talks or for military collaboration. The French political right disliked a pact with communism, or the idea of fighting on behalf of the Soviet Union, so that by the time it was ratified in Paris, in March 1936, there was still no agreement for military collaboration, which rendered the Pact worthless. [8] When Germany declared rearmament in spring 1935 and remilitarised the Rhineland in March 1936, the Soviet Union called for collective action but found no support. Although some historians now argue that Britain and France should have embraced a military alliance with Moscow to restrain Germany, there were obvious difficulties in the way. The Western powers distrusted the Soviet Union and worried that the Soviet version of collective security was linked to the spread of communism, a fear that grew with Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War and the spread of communist movements in the colonial empire. The ideological gulf between the Soviet Union and the other major League powers was a permanent barrier to closer political or military ties. Nor, in the end, was it ever clear what the Soviet Union would deliver in terms of military intervention in Europe.

The major factor undermining the efforts to establish multilateral co-operation was the severe economic crisis of 1929-32. The collapse in world trade and financial markets encouraged states to look to their own interests and to protect their home populations from the international crisis. The rise of economic protectionism was matched by protectionist politics. The failure of the World Economic Conference in June 1933 and the Disarmament Conference in 1934 symbolised the shift to a nationalist agenda and a strategy of rearmament, not only in Japan, Germany, and Italy, all hit severely by the

[7] Henri Etienne, 'The Road to Collective Security: Soviet Russia, the League of Nations, and the Emergence of the *ius contra bellum* in the Aftermath of the Russian Revolution', *Journal of the History of International Law*, 22/2-3 (2020) 356-7, 372-6; Michael Carley, *Stalin's Gamble: The Search for Allies against Hitler, 1930-1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), 151, 187-8.

[8] Carley, *Stalin's Gamble*, 373-84, 482-3.

economic tempest, but also in Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, all three of which began programmes of military expansion in the mid-1930s, the Soviet Union to an exceptional peacetime level. In both the British and French cases, the end of the disarmament project turned the two states to isolationist strategies of military preparation. The British government opted for the expansion of air and naval power to defend the British Isles and the wider global empire, prompted by Neville Chamberlain as chancellor of the exchequer, who in 1935 argued that 'we must hurry our own rearmament in the course of the next 4 or 5 years.' [9] The plans included the development of a bomber striking force to act as a deterrent against the growth of German air power after 1933. The French government developed the Maginot Line fortifications along the eastern French border with Germany to protect metropolitan France rather than planning to assist the states of Eastern and Central Europe militarily, as had been the case earlier in the 1920s.

The governments of Germany, Italy, and Japan reacted differently to the economic crisis. They rejected any further support for internationalism, either geopolitical or economic. Instead they saw territorial expansion and self-sufficiency as the answer to their economic difficulties and their desire for parity of status with the major Western powers. Here, too, rearmament was linked to national ambitions, not to any collective military effort. Empire-building was to be done without any formal military alliance between the three revisionist states. The so-called 'Axis' was a product of the future world war, not the 1930s. But the radical nationalist agenda pursued in all three states in the 1930s opened up a wide ideological gulf between them and the Western democracies that made collaboration difficult, though not impossible.

In place of League efforts for peace, there developed in the 1930s a web of bilateral treaties of non-aggression or neutrality with the same object of trying to reduce the risk of war. The Soviet Union signed ten-year pacts of non-aggression and neutrality between 1931 and 1937 with Afghanistan, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, France, Italy, and China (at least four of which the Soviet Union later annexed or attacked). The pact signed with Germany in August 1939 was one of a long string of agreements designed to keep the Soviet Union out of war, not an aberration. France made a series of bilateral treaties with states in Eastern Europe – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania – with the object of encouraging them to stand up to German ambitions in the region. The pacts proved of little value. French promises of credits and armaments for Romania, for example, were regularly delayed, the military equipment sold was obsolescent, and there was no military convention promising French assistance until 1939. Romania found the Czech arms industry more useful, since the Czechs wanted a strengthened Romania to contain Hungary and were willing to export military equipment to achieve it. [10] Regional pacts between the states of Eastern Europe and the Balkans signed in 1933 and 1934 gave no guarantee of safety without the support of a major power and unsurprisingly German political and economic pressure brought most of the region into the German sphere even before the war. The treaties signed for East Asia and the Pacific region at the 1922 Washington Conference to protect Chinese interests and to maintain the status quo in the Pacific in the long run proved just as ineffective in the absence of British or American determination to enforce them. [11]

In the absence of fixed military alliances, and in the face of the powerlessness of the League,

[9] Joe Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: The Arms Race and the Second World War 1931-1941* (London: John Murray, 2010), 142-3.
[10] Martin Thomas, 'To arm an ally: French arms sales to Romania, 1926-1940', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19/2 (1996), 231-2, 244-53.
[11] Yoichi Kibata, 'British Imperialism in Asia and Anglo-Japanese Relations 1930s to 1950s' in Nicholas White (ed), *The International Order of Asia in the 1930s and 1950s* (London: Routledge, 2010), 49-54.

the major powers offered military assistance in key areas of crisis. The most important region was China, where the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek tried to cope with internal disunity and the encroachment of Japanese forces in Manchuria and the northern provinces. At one point or another, military assistance was provided by Germany, Italy, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The Chinese army was the beneficiary of advice from German generals (who had to operate in civilian clothes to avoid violating the Versailles terms) until the Hitler regime insisted in 1938 on a pro-Japanese course and withdrew them. The British Royal Navy sent a mission to China in 1931 to advise on organisation and training and to encourage the Chinese admiralty to buy British ships, though without success. The Chinese navy minister, Admiral Chen Shaokuan, either ignored or rejected the advice of the British mission. [12]

Chiang's enthusiasm for air power led to a major Italian presence in China from 1933 when a formal Italian-Chinese agreement was signed to allow the Italians to build an air base at Nanchang, to train Chinese aviators, and to supply Italian aircraft. Chinese pilots were sent on courses in Italy, while Italian instructors arrived at Nanjing University to train pilots there. In May 1934, General Roberto Lordi was appointed chief-of-staff of the tiny Chinese air force until he was withdrawn on Mussolini's orders in 1935 as Italy too swung behind support for Japan. In 1937, Mussolini formally recognised the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and Chiang ended the Italian mission. [13] A private-enterprise project by American airmen at a base in Hangzhou, established in 1932, was expanded after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, and despite the United States Neutrality Laws of 1934 and 1937, became the most important source of expertise and aircraft by 1940 based around the Intercontinental aircraft company. In February 1939, Chiang even invited the British Royal Air Force to send a mission to China to re-organise China's 'rotten air force'.[14] The military assistance was of little help. The Chinese air force and navy were rapidly overwhelmed by Japanese forces in 1937.

More surprising, given the Soviet leadership's commitment to collective security to prevent war, was the supply of Soviet men and equipment to support the Chinese war effort. Codenamed Operation Zet, the Soviet air force sent 900 aircraft and a large cohort of engineers and pilots between 1937 and 1940, at least 200 of whom died in combat against the Japanese air force.[15] In 1938 and 1939 the Soviet Union fought two major engagements with Japanese forces along the border with Manchuria, finally concluded in September 1939 following Japanese defeat. At the same time Soviet military assistance, chiefly air power, was also helping the Spanish Republican forces in the civil war that broke out in July 1936 and continued until the spring of 1939. The Spanish crisis was symptomatic of the general inability to prevent conflict and to stabilise the global order. It was also the major example of military collaboration between states in the 1930s. Soviet assistance was matched by military aid for the Nationalist side from Italy and Germany, anticipating the battle lines of the later World War. At British initiative, a Non-Intervention Committee was established to limit foreign involvement in the civil war, but it was entirely ineffective and at moments threatened to bring Italy, Britain, and France to the brink of conflict in the Mediterranean. British distrust of Soviet motives in Spain inhibited support for the Republic from fear that Spain might become a communist outpost in Western Europe.

[12] Liam Caswell, ' "Rather a Sham": The 1931-1933 British Naval Mission to China and the Failure of Anglo-Chinese Diplomacy during the "Nanking Decade" ', *International History Review*, 45/3 (2023), 496-502.
[13] Orazio Coco, 'The Italian Military Aviation in Nationalist China: General Roberto Lordi and the Italian Mission in Nanchang (1933-1937), *International History Review*, 44/4 (2022), 698-712.
[14] Eugenie Buchan, *A Few Planes for China: The Birth of the Flying Tigers* (Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 2017), 1-2, 12-16.
[15] Buchan, *A Few Planes for China*, 2-4.

The absence of French and British intervention in Spain was taken as an indication that the two major League powers were unwilling to exert their political influence and military strength any longer to sustain a secure international order, with all that that implied now for states seeking revision.

Soviet assistance to the Republican regime in Spain began several months after the onset of the civil war against General Francisco Franco's nationalist rebels. Stalin's motives seem to have been twofold: first. To show the West that he was serious about collective security against the fascist threat, second, to ensure that the interests of Soviet communism would be served in the event of a Republican victory. He was keen to avoid any conflict with Germany, but as in China he hoped that military collaboration would prevent success by enemies of the Soviet Union.[16] Soviet aid was substantial, amounting to 646 aircraft (many of them of modern design), 20,000 machine-guns, 495,000 rifles, 497 artillery pieces, and over 500 armoured vehicles, most of the aid delivered in the first year of the civil war. In addition, around 2,000 military personnel were sent, most of them to assist the Republican armed forces with the aircraft and tanks the Soviet Union supplied. The collaboration suffered from a number of problems. It proved difficult to supply adequate ammunition or spare parts, which reduced serviceability and prevented the best use of the artillery. Many of the fighters on the Republican side were volunteers or militia with little military training and poor discipline, unable to make the best use of the supply of equipment from outside. [17]

Italian and German intervention on behalf of the Nationalist forces in Spain showed a more successful level of military collaboration. The Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, hoped to prevent a left-wing victory in Spain and to promote the international interests of fascism; at the same time military intervention would enhance his claim to make Italy the dominant power in the Mediterranean basin at the expense of Britain and France. Unlike the Soviet Union or Germany, Mussolini sent large numbers of troops, both regular army and fascist militia, a total of 78,000 over almost three years, though seldom more than 30,000 at any one time. Relations with Franco's Nationalist forces were strained, but it was military equipment rather than manpower that helped more. Italy supplied around 900 artillery pieces and, more importantly, seven million artillery shells. The Italian supply of 750 aircraft and around 250 armoured vehicles also benefited from a better level of repair facilities and spare parts.[18] German military assistance consisted almost entirely of air support for the Nationalist ground forces. The motives of the German leadership were less clearcut. Spain was an important source of raw materials, and it was essential that the country did not become a potential communist outpost in Western Europe. But Hitler was not enthusiastic about intervention, and German airmen were under instructions not to approach too close to the French frontier or to undertake any operations that risked creating a wider crisis. The Condor Legion, as the air unit was called, provided effective reconnaissance support for the Spanish army, and bombed Republican communications, shipping, and troop concentrations. Intervention proved useful as a way of refining aerial tactics for ground support roles and testing modern air technology, but it was not necessarily decisive, any more than Italian assistance. There were limits to the extent that mutual military collaboration might influence a military outcome, evident in both China and Spain. As the commander of the Condor Legion, Wener von

[16] John Maccannon, 'Soviet Intervention in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: A Reexamination', *Russian History*, 22/2 (1995), 158-66.
[17] Charles Esdaile, *The Spanish Civil War: A Military History* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2018), 343-4, 351-4.
[18] John Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), Appendix 6; Javier Rodrigo, *Fascist Italy and the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Routledge, 2021), 1-2; Michael Alpert, *Franco and the Condor Legion: The Spanish Civil War in the Air* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 193.

Richthofen, claimed 'the Spanish have to win this war by themselves'.[19]

As the Spanish Civil War showed, the role of Britain and France was central in the 1930s to understanding why the multilateral commitment to peace in the 1920s gave way to a decade of crisis and war. Both were global empires, and Britain was still regarded as the hegemonic power in the global order. Britain played a major part in founding the League and sustaining the commitment to peaceful settlement of disputes. Neither Britain nor France, chief beneficiaries of the post-1919 settlement, wanted war, but in the 1930s they faced circumstances that severely constrained their capacity to act in the face of crisis until their decision in September 1939 that waging war was the only way to secure future peace. In the first place, there was no formal alliance between the two major states that committed them to fight on each other's behalf. Although the common assumption was that they would ally together in case of crisis, such an assumption was never taken for granted. Relations between London and Paris were often strained, and French strategy in Eastern Europe and the Franco-Soviet Pact were disliked by British politicians who for most of the 1930s were determined to avoid a renewed 'Continental commitment' that had drawn them into World War I. Both states acted in many cases unilaterally rather than adopting a common front, even though they shared a commitment to averting major war.

In both cases, a priority was to preserve the global empire, from which both states derived growing economic and resource benefits, and their global status. The stability of empire was nevertheless challenged by popular nationalist protest and at times by open violence. In Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Morocco, French Indo-China, and India, British or French forces were in action at some point in the inter-war years. In Palestine, a mandate from the League of Nations, Britain had more regular troops committed by 1939 than there were stationed in Britain. For all the commitment to internationalism they expressed in the League, Britain and France would accept no interference in the empire. Counter-insurgency and political suppression were widespread. Britain had wide global responsibilities. Army, air, and naval forces were maintained in Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, India, Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tientsin, as well as Bermuda.[20]The integrity of the empire was also challenged by the expansion of Japan in China and Italy in north and east Africa. Neither Britain nor France could afford the cost of defending the entire global empire, so that action in Europe was always inhibited by the global overstretch from which both states suffered. The reluctance to confront Japan in China or Italy in Africa stemmed from concern that empire interests were too vulnerable to risk conflict (as indeed turned out to be the case in 1941-2). Both global empires also confronted the paradox that it was difficult to obstruct the imperialism of other states while justifying their own possession of vast imperial territories.

Britain and France were also inhibited by the effects of the economic slump and the desire to protect home populations from its effects. Domestic opinion was strongly against the idea of risking a major war again and in Britain there was an extensive anti-war movement and influential pacifist lobbies. The British Leage of Nations Union, committed to the anti-war ideals of the League, had a nominal membership by the 1930s of more than one million members. In 1935 the Union organised a

[19] James Corum, 'The Luftwaffe and the coalition air war in Spain, 1936-1939', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 18/1 (1995), 69-76; Alpert, *Franco and the Condor Legion*, 197-200, 204.

[20] T. R. Moreman, 'Small Wars and "imperial policing": The British army and the theory and practice of colonial warfare in the British Empire, 1919-39', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19/4 (1996)105-8, 112-16; David Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169-70, 200-3; Raymond Betts, *France and Decolonisation 1900-1960* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 33-47.

'Peace Ballot' of the population, and found over 11 million voters supporting membership of the League and tacit approval of its aims. [21] In France, there were more than fifty pacifist organisations by the 1930s, including former veterans of the First World War; French pacifists helped to found the International Peace Campaign in 1936, which won support across democratic Europe. [22] In neither major state was there a mandate for risking war and strong preference for peace, even if that meant expedient acceptance of Japanese conquests in Asia, Italian conquest in Africa, and German renunciation of the terms of the Versailles Settlement. Nevertheless, as the League system collapsed, both states accepted the need to rearm, the British government from 1934, the French government from 1936. It is important to recall that they were already in the early-1930s the most heavily armed states in the world, so that rearmament was building on an existing base. The claim that they rearmed too little and too late is a myth. Rearmament had to be conducted cautiously, to avoid economic crisis or labour hostility, but it was a fact. By 1939 both states had the highest percentage of the national product devoted to military preparation in their history.

Nor did the two states adopt a policy of spineless 'appeasement' of the aggressor states as is so commonly suggested.[23] Given the uncertainties they faced at home and abroad, they sought a mix of strategies of prudent conciliation, containment, and deterrence. In 1936, Neville Chamberlain, chancellor of the exchequer, reacting to Mussolini's defiance of Britain, claimed 'What I shall work for is a Britain strong enough to make it impossible for her wishes to be flouted again.' [24] His support of rearmament was designed to ensure that British interests could be adequately protected. At the same time, he hoped that it might be possible to produce what he called a 'Grand Settlement' of European problems through negotiation rather than violence. The Munich agreement over the fate of the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, which prevented Hitler waging war against the Czechs as he intended, was a product of this strategy of containment and conciliation. French policy was less consistent, since there were deep divisions between right and left over the proper approach to the German threat, but by late 1938 the government of Édouard Daladier accelerated French military build-up and determined on a strategy of *fermeté* (firmness) in the face of further provocation from Germany. The idea that aggression might be deterred remained an ambition right up to the outbreak of war in 1939, but the obverse of deterrence is a willingness to wage war if deterrence fails.

Only in 1939 did the British and French governments reluctantly come to the decision that the many problems and threats they faced as global powers could only be resolved by war. Both governments benefited from a sharp change in domestic opinion, which had now swung round decisively in favour of conflict if there were no other way to rein in continued aggression. Opinion polls showed that more than 70 per cent of respondents were opposed to further concessions to Hitler's Germany. By this time the League as the forum for multilateral agreement on collective security had long disappeared and it played no part in the final crisis in 1939. Instead, Britain made agreements that

[21] For details see Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919-1939* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 224-8, 235-41.
[22] Norman Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134-9.
[23] On appeasement see Martin Thomas, 'Appeasement in the late Third Republic', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 18 (2008), 567-89; Brian McKercher, 'National security and imperial defence: British grand strategy and appeasement, 1930-1939', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 19 (2008), 391-442; Norris Ripsman, Jack Levy, 'Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s', *International Security*, 33/2 (2008), 848-81; Stephen Lobell, 'Bringing Balancing Back In: Britain's Targeted Balancing, 1936-1939', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35/6 (2012), 747-73.
[24] Maiolo, *Cry Havoc*, 142-3.

promised military commitment, first the guarantee to Poland in late March 1939, then agreement with the French government to begin joint staff talks for a common 'war plan', which was outlined by April. The plan called for mutual collaboration between French and British forces to repeat the experience of the First World War – a three-year programme to blockade and bomb Germany until the German war effort faced collapse from within and could be defeated in the field. [25] Guarantees were also given to Greece and Romania, in case Germany moved into the Balkans with military force.

The promise of military assistance to the Poles was poorly redeemed: there was little collaboration, and Polish requests for arms and financial support failed to materialise in time. The French high command sent advisers to Warsaw but little else. A half-hearted promise to mount an offensive in the west against the German *Westwall* defences when Germany attacked Poland was abandoned when war broke out. [26] There was in 1939 only a limited commitment from the British armed forces to support France in a future ground war. Only five army divisions were sent to France in the first four months of the war, and eight more underequipped divisions by the time the Germans attacked. Most British aircraft were kept in the British Isles rather than sent to France to create a stronger Allied air force. The first alliance between major states for common military endeavour since 1918 was a fragile one, and ended in disaster when the German army in May and June 1940 conquered France in six weeks.[27] Britain's priority for naval and air rearmament could defend the British Isles, but not save France from defeat. Later, British Empire defeats in Greece, North Africa, and Southeast Asia showed that anxiety in the 1930s about risking world war had not been misplaced. Britain simply lacked the resources to fight effectively in three separate theatres, and at the same time to survive the war at sea against the submarine.

Why did it prove so difficult to marshal a multilateral array of states committed to maintaining international peace and security in the crises of the 1930s? The absence of co-operation in the aftermath of the economic crash when national survival became a priority was one explanation. There was no military collaboration between the major states that might have created a bloc against aggression because there was so little common ground between the status quo powers and the revisionist states, including the Soviet Union, whose radical anti-Western ideology set them apart. The institutional structure set up in the 1920s to monitor and control breaches of the peace was too weak to cope with real crises in the 1930s. Above all, the two states that acted as hegemonic powers neither orchestrated together their international policies nor possessed sufficient military strength to ensure that the claim to global power could be adequately defended. It was this vacuum at the centre of the states' system that encouraged Japan, Italy, and Germany to embark on regional strategies of territorial expansion and economic reform. After 1945, the situation was different. The hegemonic powers - the United States and the Soviet Union - possessed the military power to secure their wider interests and to insist on multilateral military co-operation via NATO or the Warsaw Pact, or regional security pacts that were credible instruments of deterrence. The United Nations has faced many of the same limitations

[25] On Franco-British strategic thinking see William Philpott, Martin Alexander, 'The Entente Cordiale and the next war: Anglo-French views on future military cooperation, 1928-1939', *Intelligence and National Security*, 13 (1998), 68-76.

[26] For a good recent account of the Polish-German war see Roger Moorhouse, *First to Fight: The Polish War 1939* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019).

[27] On French defeat see Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Martin Alexander, ' "Fighting to the Last Frenchman?": Reflections on the BEF deployment to France and the strains in the Franco-British alliance, 1939-1940' in Joel Blatt (ed), *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1998).

as the League of Nations in attempting to keep the peace, but global security was maintained outside the structure of the United Nations by the hegemonic states for almost fifty years, though not without regular crises. Now thirty years after the end of the Cold War, a multi-polar world is once again prompting global insecurity.