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At the end of the First World War, the age-old debate about the relative roles of morality and interest in international affairs seemed to have been resolved in favor of the dominance of law and ethics. Under the shock of the cataclysm, many hoped for a better world as free as possible from the kind of *Realpolitik* which, in their view, had decimated the youth of a generation. America emerged as the catalyst of this process even as it was withdrawing into isolationism. Wilson legacy was that Europe embarked on the Wilsonian course of trying to preserve stability via collective security, rather than the traditional European approach of alliances and the balance of power, despite the absence of America.

In subsequent American usage, alliances in which America participated (such as NATO) were generally described as instruments of collective security. This is not, however, how the term was originally conceived, for in their essence, the concepts of collective security and of alliances are diametrically opposed. Traditional alliances were directed against specific threats and defined precise obligations for specific groups of countries linked by shared national interests or mutual security concerns. Collective security defines no particular threat, guarantees no individual nation, and discriminates against none. It is theoretically designed to resist *any* threat to the peace, by whoever might pose it and against whomever it might be directed. Alliances always presume a specific potential adversary; collective security defends international law in the abstract, which it seeks to sustain in much the same way that a judicial system upholds a domestic criminal code. It no more assumes a particular culprit than does domestic law. In an alliance, the *casus belli* is an attack on the interests or the security of its members. The *casus belli* of collective security is the violation of the principle of “peaceful” settlement of disputes in which all peoples of the world are assumed to have a common interest. Therefore, force has to be assembled on a case-by-case basis from a shifting group of nations with a mutual interest in “peacekeeping.”

The purpose of an alliance is to produce an obligation more predictable and precise than an analysis of national interest. Collective security works in the exact opposite way. It leaves the application of its principles to the interpretation of particular circumstances when they arise, unintentionally putting a large premium on the mood of the moment and hence, on national self-will.

Collective security contributes to security only if all nations—or at least all nations relevant to collective defense—share nearly identical views about the nature of the challenge and are prepared to use force or apply sanctions on the “merits” of the case, regardless of the specific national interest they may have in the issues at hand. Only if these conditions are fulfilled can a world organization devise sanctions or act as an arbiter of international affairs.

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In the end, collective security fell prey to the weakness of its central premise—that all nations have the same interest in resisting a particular act of aggression and are prepared to run identical risks in opposing it. Experience has shown these assumptions to be false. No act of aggression involving a major power has ever been defeated by applying the principle of collective security. Either the world community has refused to assess the act as one which constituted aggression, or it has disagreed over the appropriate sanctions. And when sanctions were applied, they inevitably reflected the lowest common denominator, often proving so ineffectual that they did more harm than good.

At the time of the Japanese conquest of Manchuria in 1932, the League had no machinery for sanctions. It remedied this defect, but faced with Italian aggression against Abyssinia, it voted for sanctions while stopping short of imposing a cutoff of oil with the slogan “All sanctions short of war.” When Austria was forcibly united with Germany and Czechoslovakia’s freedom was extinguished, there was no League reaction at all. The last act of the League of Nations, which no longer contained Germany, Japan, or Italy, was to expel the Soviet Union after it attacked Finland in 1939. It had no effect on Soviet actions.

During the Cold War, the United Nations proved equally ineffective in every case involving Great Power aggression, due to either the communist veto in the Security Council or the reluctance on the part of smaller countries to run risks on behalf of issues they felt did not concern them. The United Nations was ineffective or at the sidelines during the Berlin crises and during the Soviet interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. It was irrelevant in the Cuban Missile Crisis until the two superpowers agreed to settle. America was able to invoke the authority of the United Nations against North Korean aggression in 1950 only because the Soviet representative was boycotting the Security Council and the General Assembly was still dominated by countries eager to enlist America against the threat of Soviet aggression in Europe. The United Nations did provide a convenient meeting place for diplomats and a useful forum for the exchange of ideas. It also performed important technical functions. But it failed to fulfill the underlying premise of collective security—the prevention of war and collective resistance to aggression.

This has been true of the United Nations even in the post-Cold War period. In the Gulf War of 1991, it did indeed ratify American actions, but resistance to Iraqi aggression was hardly an application of the doctrine of collective security. Not waiting for an international consensus, the United States had unilaterally dispatched a large expeditionary force. Other nations could gain influence over America’s actions only by joining what was in effect an American enterprise; they could not avoid the risks of conflict by vetoing it. Additionally, domestic upheavals in the Soviet Union and China gave the permanent members of the UN Security Council an incentive to maintain America’s goodwill. In the Gulf War, collective security was invoked as a justification of American leadership, not as a substitute for it.

Of course, these lessons had not yet been learned in the innocent days when the concept of collective security was first being introduced into diplomacy. The post-Versailles statesmen had half-convinced themselves that armaments were the cause of tensions, not the result of them, and half-believed that if goodwill replaced the suspiciousness of traditional diplomacy, international conflict might be eradicated. Despite having been emotionally drained by the war, the European leaders should have realized that a general doctrine of collective security could never work, even if it overcame all the other hurdles it faced as long as it excluded three of the most powerful nations of the world: the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union. For the United States had refused to join the League, Germany was barred from it, and the Soviet Union, which was treated as a pariah, disdained it.

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After a decade in which diplomacy had focused on Europe, it was—unexpectedly—Japan which demonstrated the hollowness of collective security and of the League itself, ushering in a decade of mounting violence in the 1903s.

In 1931, Japanese forces occupied Manchuria, which legally was a part of China, although the authority of the Chinese central government had not operated there for many years. Intervention on such a scale had not been attempted since the founding of the League. But the League had no enforcement machinery for even the economic sanctions contemplated in its article 16. In its hesitations, the League exemplified the basic dilemma of collective security: no country was prepared to fight a war against Japan (or was in a position to do so without American participation, since the Japanese navy dominated Asian waters). Even if the machinery for economic sanctions had existed, no country was willing to curtail trade with Japan in the midst of the Depression; on the other hand, no country was willing to accept the occupation of Manchuria. None of the League members knew how to overcome these self-inflicted contradictions.

Finally, a mechanism was devised for doing nothing at all. It took the form of a fact-finding mission—the standard device for diplomats signaling that inaction is the desired outcome. Such commissions take time to assemble, to undertake studies, and to reach a consensus—by which point, with luck, the problem might even have gone away. Japan felt so confident of this pattern that it took the lead in recommending such a study. What came to be known as the Lytton Commission reported that Japan had justified grievances but had erred by not first exhausting all peaceful means of redress. The mildest of rebukes for occupying a territory larger than itself proved too much for Japan, which responded by withdrawing from the League of Nations. It was the first step toward the unraveling of the entire institution.

In Europe, the whole incident was treated as a kind of aberration peculiar to distant continents. Disarmament talks continued as if there were no Manchurian crisis, turning the debate over security versus parity into a largely ceremonial act. Then, on January 30, 1933, Hitler came to power in

Germany and demonstrated that the Versailles system had indeed been a house of cards.