On September 18, 1931, an explosion shook a Japanese-owned railway in Mukden, Manchuria. Japan’s Kwantung Army accused Chinese troops of attempting to destroy Japan’s railway; in reality, it was the colonial army itself that had sabotaged the property as a pretext to occupy the city. During the first few weeks of the crisis, Tokyo’s government attempted to halt the Kwantung Army’s march through Manchuria. While the government’s efforts appeared successful at first, by the end of October the Kwantung Army was launching air strikes against Chinchow, where Manchuria’s former governor Chang Hsueh-liang had taken refuge. In Tokyo, the voices for restraint receded. By September 1932, Japan’s government opted to sever Manchuria from China, recognizing the puppet-state Manchuoko.

This was not the first time Japan had used its increasing might to pursue revisionist ambitions. Throughout the course of its rise, Japan expanded its territory, often using force to achieve its aims. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War, Japan claimed Taiwan as its own. In 1905, Japan’s defeat of Russia gave it control over Korea, which it would formally annex in 1910. Throughout the early twentieth century, Japan sought to dominate Manchuria, pushing aside Russian and Chinese rivals to gain control over the territory. Yet, whatever the scope of Japanese revisionism in the early twentieth century, it was the expansion into Manchuria that proved a tipping point, launching what many scholars call Japan’s “fifteen years’ war.” It was during the Manchurian crisis that Japan became locked into a futile conflict with China. It was in Manchuria that Japan became mired in a nationalist struggle that sucked critical economic and military resources from the struggling Japanese state. Within Japan, the years that followed the
Manchurian crisis would see the military elite wrest seats of power from political parties. By 1937, Japan was dominated by nationalist, pan-Asianist hardliners and military leaders, a coalition driven toward tragically expansionist projects.

Internationally, the Manchurian crisis provoked a sea change in how the United States responded to Japan’s might. Throughout the early twentieth century, the great powers had largely accommodated Japan, cooperating with the power as it expanded into Korea and Taiwan, and made early incursions into Manchuria. At the beginning of the Manchurian crisis, the Hoover administration appeared reluctant to steer the United States on a course toward conflict with Japan over Manchuria. It was not immediately apparent to American officials that Japanese actions in Manchuria even amounted to a “crisis.” Japan’s aggression in China was neither unexpected nor unusual; and this was not the first time a state had used force to quell local disorder. And if Japan’s aims were revisionist, most American officials believed the United States had neither the capacity nor interest to contest Japan in Manchuria.

But by late 1931, much of the administration had concluded, as Secretary of State Henry Stimson stated, that “our attempt to solve the Manchurian problem by discussion and conciliation had failed,” and that it was time to risk a more confrontational policy. Over the next few months, Hoover, Stimson, and other members of the State Department laid the foundations of what became known as the Stimson Doctrine: the refusal to recognize any treaty between Japan and China that would “impair the treaty rights of the United States or its citizens in China . . . [or] which may be brought about by means contrary to the covenants and obligations of the pact of Paris of August 27, 1928.” More broadly, the United States came to see Japan as a state that would and could not be bound by international treaties; Japan, officials argued, would not only take Manchuria; they would strive to overturn the Washington system, the U.S. order in the Pacific. The Manchurian crisis thus pushed the United States from accommodation to containment, laying the foundation for a policy that would shape U.S.-Japanese relations for the next decade.

The central argument of this book is that a rising power’s legitimation strategies—its reasons for pursuing revision—shape a great power’s response to its expansion. The United States’ turn toward confrontation was driven, not only by Japan’s growing capabilities or its interests in China, but by Japan’s reasons for invading Manchuria. As Japan’s forces moved through Manchuria, the great powers demanded Japan justify its aggression. Instead of appealing to existing treaties to legitimate their actions, Japan’s officials stated that the norms of the Washington system were irrelevant in Manchuria, arguing instead that it would seek to establish an alternative order, one more suited to the governance of the Asia-Pacific. It was this revolutionary rejection of the dominant order that ultimately pushed the United States toward a policy of confrontation.
Japan’s leaders were neither deaf nor dumb; they understood what reasons were legitimate to the Western powers and had successfully used appeals to rules and norms to legitimate their expansion for decades. Why would it now reject these rules and risk appearing a revolutionary state? Japan’s failure to legitimate their actions in Manchuria demonstrates the interaction between international and domestic legitimacy, and how attempts to appease one audience can provoke the hostility of another. As a rising power, Japan’s leaders faced ongoing tensions between internationalist and nationalist coalitions, with contrasting claims to legitimacy. We’ve seen such fragmentation in other cases, but what made these dynamics particularly pernicious was Japan’s inability to invoke a multivocal strategy. Without the capacity to speak multivocally, Japan’s leaders instead turned to hardline rhetoric to shore up their domestic position, which ultimately provoked confrontational strategies. At the same time, Japan’s most important audience for its claims—the United States—was an institutionally vulnerable power, one that believed its security rested on the “scraps of paper” that composed the Washington system. As a result, U.S. officials heard Japan’s appeals as a revolutionary threat to its own security.

The Manchurian Incident and Japan’s Rise in World Politics

In 1853, when Commodore Perry confronted a closed and isolated Japan, it seemed likely the state would suffer the same fate as China, its sovereignty decimated by the imperial powers. Instead, by the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was a rising power itself. Its increasing economic, military, and diplomatic might stemmed from the reforms that followed the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which wrested power away the shogunate and into the hands of the genro, the advisors to Japan’s emperor. In the years following the restoration, the genro ordered universal conscription, using European militaries as models for institutional reform. Economically, the genro accelerated industrialization, building infrastructure and the laying the foundations for a trading state. Politically, the genro authored Japan’s constitution, created a parliament, the Diet, and a diplomatic corps.

These military, economic, and political reforms formed the foundations of Japan’s increasing power. Japan’s growing might unleashed an increasingly expansionist foreign policy, as Japan sought to take its place among the imperial powers. Japan’s expansion was, in many respects, unremarkable; it was, as one historian remarks, conducted in a “cautious and ‘realistic’ manner,” allowing Japan to “to emerge as a respectable member of the western imperialist community.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Japan was largely concerned with securing “spheres of influence” along its periphery. In the 1870s, Japan’s leaders sent three thousand soldiers to Formosa, arguing that China lacked legal jurisdiction over the
After defeating China in 1895, Japan took control of Liaotung and Taiwan. As the Qing dynasty faltered, and Russian influence waned, Japan expanded into Korea, gaining formal recognition of its “special interests” after the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, and formally annexing the state in 1910.

Japan’s expansion into Manchuria came as no surprise. Japan’s leaders consistently argued it should have a sphere of influence in Manchuria, claiming security and economic interests in the region that could be secured only through control over the territory. Some leaders emphasized Japan’s historical connection as well, arguing that Japan’s connections were “based on the deep and particular relationship between Manchuria and our empire.” After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan gained rights to Manchuria’s railway network, and in 1906 formed the semigovernmental South Manchurian Railway Company (SMR). The SMR became the “economic spine” of Manchuria; technically a private company, it operated with government support and was protected by Japan’s military, the Kwantung Army. The SMR did not merely exert control over the Manchurian railway; it governed the bulk of Japan’s economic activity in Manchuria, its “mining, industry, commerce, power supply, foreign trade, and shipping.” It controlled the politics of the towns along the seven hundred miles of railway. All of these holdings were protected by Japan’s imperial forces, the Kwantung Army.

In 1915, with the European powers engulfed in conflict, Japan attempted to gain formal control over Manchuria, presenting China with “Twenty-One Demands” that, among other claims, pressed China to acknowledge Japan’s status in the territory. Throughout the 1920s, Japan sought to secure a sphere of influence in Manchuria by working with political collaborators to exert control over the territory. Concerned by China’s growing nationalist movement, Japan threw its support behind a local warlord, Chang Tso-lin, in hopes of governing the territory indirectly. Chang proved an unreliable partner. He sought to expand south against Chinese nationalist forces, risking his control of Manchuria. He built railways to compete with the SMR, and by 1928 was seeking support from China, Great Britain, and the United States.

It was in this context that expansion in Manchuria unfolded. The explosion in September 1931 was not the first time the Kwantung Army used force as a means to command direct control over the territory. In 1928, the army assassinated Chang, blowing up his train and placing the blame on Chinese forces. The imperial forces hoped Tokyo would order its military to secure the territory and establish formal rule. Instead Japan’s government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi, condemned the army’s actions as illegal and imprudent. While Tanaka’s government hoped to secure Japan’s grip on Manchuria, they also believed blatant military action was counterproductive and risked international condemnation. Tanaka worked to ensure the international response was muted, fervently
making “appropriate explanations” to the Western powers for Japan’s military actions. His efforts were successful: the army was unable to advance in Manchuria, and the great powers, though concerned, remained quiet.

In 1931, the Kwantung Army’s efforts had a much different outcome. Once again, imperial forces staged an attack on the Manchurian railway, blaming Chinese forces and using the attack as a pretext to advance throughout Manchuria. By the end of 1931, the Kwantung Army had taken control of most of Manchuria’s major urban centers, and at the start of the New Year, Japanese troops clashed with Chinese forces in Shanghai. In February 1932, the imperial forces declared victory, and demanded Tokyo and the other great powers recognize the independent state of Manchukuo. Yet while Japan may have secured control over Manchuria, it also provoked hostility: Manchuria proved the “tipping point” of Japan’s rise, turning the great powers—especially the United States—away from accommodation and toward confrontation.

The United States and the Turn toward Confrontation: The Stimson Doctrine

From 1931 through the attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States response to Japan’s rise was one of containment and confrontation, a policy that aimed to stem and even roll back Japan’s expansion in Manchuria. The strategy found its first expression in the Stimson Doctrine, named for the secretary of state who advocated a “firm ground and aggressive stand towards Japan,” as he recorded in his diaries. Key to the Stimson Doctrine was “nonrecognition,” the principle that the United States would not recognize any political or territorial revisions made in violation of standing treaties, especially the rules codified in the Nine Power Treaty and the Washington system. Any Japanese expansion that attacked China’s sovereignty, or aggression beyond what was required for self-defense, was illegitimate. Formulated in the autumn of 1931, the Stimson Doctrine was publicly announced in a note to Japan and China on January 7, 1932. Stimson advertised the U.S. new position in a public letter to Senator Borah in February 1932, and in August 1932, Stimson declared the administration’s doctrine in a forceful speech in front of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Some see the Stimson Doctrine was more appeasement than containment, a weak policy that all but acquiesced to Japan’s expansion in the Pacific. As Ogata argues, “The effect of the Stimson doctrine has often been minimized on the grounds that it lacked teeth.” The Stimson Doctrine did nothing to end the army’s expansion in Manchuria, to stop Japan’s recognition of Manchukuo in 1932, or halt Japan’s expansion into China and Southeast Asia in the late 1930s. Early on the Stimson Doctrine relied only on “moral suasion” and public opinion to stem Japan’s expansionist aims. Stimson’s attempts to add economic and military teeth to the doctrine
initially faltered. When Stimson suggested the United States pursue economic sanctions, Hoover insisted he would remain limited to a policy of “moral pressure.”22 When Stimson further suggested, in his letter to Borah, that the United States might leave the Washington Naval Treaty and increase its own naval might, colleagues pushed back on the possibility of an arms race in the Pacific.23

To call the Stimson Doctrine ineffective containment is fair. But the doctrine was not insignificant, nor did contemporaries believe that it was an instrument of appeasement, as critics would later maintain.24 In the 1930s both proponents and critics of the policy in the Hoover administration saw the doctrine as a marked departure from the accommodation of the previous decade. As one historian argues, with the Stimson Doctrine, Hoover “committed the nation to the moral and diplomatic rejection of change except that achieved through mutual agreement. For a democracy which had acquired the highly moralistic outlook of a status quo power, the doctrine of nonrecognition implied firmness, not appeasement.”25 Stimson, for his part, argued his doctrine represented a clear attempt to get “tough” with the Japanese government, having “realized the importance of having Japan fear this country.”26 Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs, Stanley Hornbeck compared the note to the Monroe Doctrine, and many saw Stimson’s Doctrine as a “prelude to action” against Japan and thus “tended to obscure Hoover’s earlier statement that the United States was not going to get involved in a war.”27 Academic observers, like Quincy Wright, claimed the doctrine was a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, that “no diplomatic note of recent or even of distant years is likely to go down as of greater significance in the development of international law.”28

It is true that, at least initially, enforcement of the doctrine was largely diplomatic and symbolic.29 But ultimately it proved the first, decisive step in a robust plan of containment and confrontation. During his campaign, Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised his policy toward Japan would build on the Stimson Doctrine, arguing that his administration would work to “uphold the sanctity of international treaties. That is the cornerstone on which all relations between nations must rest.”30 When Roosevelt took office, he told Stimson that “he fully approved of our policy in the Far East; that his only possible criticism was that we did not begin it earlier.”31 As the decade went on, the Roosevelt administration added coercive instruments behind the containment policy. In 1933, Roosevelt announced he would use $238 million of “public works” money to rebuild the navy to treaty strength. Throughout the interwar period the Roosevelt administration, both overtly and covertly, aided China in its struggle, exporting grain to China and financing, supplying, and training its air force.32

The Stimson Doctrine thus marked the start of the United States’ deliberate and dramatic turn toward a policy of containment and confrontation.
The Manchurian crisis pushed international powers toward containment as well. Some describe the Manchurian crisis as a moment of profound Anglo-American disagreement, with the United States pushing for a hard line against Japan and Britain demurring. Early on in the crisis, Sir John Simon, the British foreign secretary, rebuffed Stimson’s attempts to produce a joint Anglo-American statement on the doctrine. As described by David Dutton, “Japan was widely seen to have a strong case against China,” and Simon informed the cabinet that Japan had the right to send troops into China. But as historians suggest, Britain quickly came around to the United States’ position. It was Simon who on March 7, 1932, proposed that the League adopt the Stimson Doctrine’s core principles and refuse to recognize any “‘changes brought about by means contrary’ to the principles of the League covenant and the Kellogg-Briand Pact.” In October 1932, the League concurred with Stimson, arguing in the Lytton report that the “recognition of present regime in Manchuria” would not be “compatible with the fundamental principle of existing international obligations.”

For their part Japan’s leaders certainly believed the Stimson Doctrine was a policy of containment and confrontation. At the outset of the crisis, Japan hoped the Western powers would support its efforts in Manchuria; Tokyo saw the Stimson Doctrine and Lytton report that followed as a rejection of Japan’s aims. Ambassador Forbes reported to the Hoover administration that the doctrine had injured relations with Tokyo. Matsuoka Yosuka, who presented Japan’s case at the League, lashed out at what he saw as the West’s containment, arguing that the “western powers had taught the Japanese the game of poker but . . . after acquiring most of the chips they pronounced the game immoral and took up contract bridge.” The United States’ strategy, he charged, was “capricious” an attempt to “dictate” terms to the Japanese in an area of their vital interest.

Critics are correct that the Stimson Doctrine, and the shift toward containment, is puzzling. The Stimson Doctrine was weak at its inception, because the United States lacked the material power to contain Japan. No American politician wanted a conflict with Japan over Manchuria; no policymaker believed the United States had the will or the might to confront Japan if that country did not abandon its revisionist aims. Yet Washington still decided to embrace a policy of containment in Manchuria. Why would the United States adopt a strategy that pulled it toward conflict in the Pacific?

An Inevitable Clash? Japan’s Rising Power in the Asia-Pacific

To focus on the Manchurian crisis as the wellspring of containment is to portray U.S. strategy toward Japan as contingent, a result of leaders’ decisions during the crisis. Yet there is no dearth of scholarship that suggests the clash between the powers was not contingent, but unavoidable. The
Manchurian crisis was insignificant: regardless of what happened in Manchuria, the United States and Japan were headed toward conflict. Japan had been rising since the late nineteenth century. Deeply dissatisfied with the territorial, economic, and political status quo, Japan’s revisionist demands were inevitable. Needing to secure its survival in the face of imperial competition, Japan thrust outward toward Korea, China, and Indonesia. The Open Door, long a staple of U.S. foreign policy in East Asia, was an unacceptable obstacle to Japan’s expansion. The United States, for its part, could not allow Japan to undermine its core financial and territorial interests. By the early twentieth century, China was already a significant market for U.S. goods, and American businessmen fantasized about future possibilities in its massive market. Japan’s expansion inherently threatened U.S. territorial holdings in the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii. The United States could not—and would not—accept Japan’s emerging regional hegemony. Japan’s growing power and capacity to threaten the United States would have eventually produced a containment strategy.

What we have in the Manchurian crisis and beyond is thus a tale of two revisionists, both of whom, rightly or wrongly, believed that each other posed a significant threat to vital interests. But these explanations overstate the extent to which the United States viewed Japan as an inherent threat. This is not to suggest that Washington believed the rising challenger was insignificant, of little concern to the United States. For years, the United States had warily watched Japan’s growth in the Asia-Pacific. At the end of World War I, the United States took steps to block Japan’s Twenty-One Demands towards China, making sure Japan could not threaten its economic interests in China or its territorial holdings in the Pacific. But more often than not, Washington used the tools of accommodation, working with Japan to limit naval procurement, to secure the Open Door and to stabilize China. The Treaty of Versailles recognized most of Japan’s formal wartime acquisitions. The United States also actively sought to bring Japan into the Washington system, a series of treaties designed to manage great power competition in the Asia-Pacific.

The Americans proved particularly willing to accommodate expansion in Manchuria, accepting that Japan had unique interests in the territory. For example, while the Nine Power Treaty, signed by the United States, Japan, and Britain in 1922, ostensibly called on its signatories to “respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China,” the treaty powers informally agreed that Japan continued to have special interests and preexisting treaty rights in Manchuria. As Theodore Roosevelt noted to President Taft, “The vital interest of the Japanese . . . is in Manchuria and Korea. It is therefore peculiarly to our interest not to take any steps as regard Manchuria which will give the Japanese cause to feel, with or without reason, that we are hostile to them.” Roosevelt helped mediate the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, which gave Japan de facto control over Manchuria. Likewise, the Lansing-Ishii Agreement of 1917, while
expressing continued commitment to an open door in China, also recognized that Japan had special interest in Manchuria.

Accommodating Japan’s rise made strategic sense. American administrations of the early twentieth century viewed Japan’s expansion in Asia—its defeat of China, its annexation of Korea, and its domination of Manchuria—as acceptable, and not at all threatening to U.S. interests. Indeed, officials argued that Japan’s domination of China could prove a boon to U.S. security, stabilizing the region during a turbulent civil war. Throughout the 1920s, officials argued, Japan proved a force for order and economic growth in Manchuria. At the beginning of the crisis, much of China was embroiled in conflict, and U.S. officials agreed that “full control’ of Manchuria was ‘the best thing which could happen.’”45 It would not be the first time a great power had acted to protect its interests in the region—Britain and the United States themselves had bombed Chinese troops at Nanking in 1927—and it would undoubtedly not be the last.

If anything, structural logics should have pushed the United States toward accommodation, not confrontation or containment. Even if Japan’s expansion did undercut U.S. interests, there was little to be done about it, especially in Manchuria. As Joseph Grew, who would become U.S. ambassador to Japan, argued, “Nothing will divert Japan from Manchuria.” In 1931, U.S. naval forces remained well below Washington Treaty levels, and the navy warned Stimson that it lacked the capabilities to check Japan’s expansion.46 In the face of a worldwide economic depression, it seemed impossible that the United States would mobilize the resources to push Japan out of Manchuria. The rapid turn toward confrontation in the Manchurian crisis, seen in this light, is a significant puzzle.

**The Politics of Harm, the Politics of Interest: Containing a Revolutionary Japan?**

The U.S. turn toward a strategy of containment and confrontation was not a given. Rather, it was only as the Hoover administration began to see Japan as a revolutionary power, one bent not on limited expansion but the domination of East Asia, that it turned toward a more coercive policy. Why was it that Japan’s actions in Manchuria signaled revolutionary aims?

**The Politics of Harm**

For some, the shift in U.S. strategy may appear a straightforward example of the politics of harm. Up until 1931, Japan’s intentions remained uncertain. Japan might have been expansionist, but for the most part, the government seemed willing to cooperate with the great powers in pursuit of its revisionist aims. But Japan’s domination of Manchuria revealed its status as
an aggressive, revolutionary state. Its offensive push into Manchuria, its bombing of Chinchow, and its incursions into Shanghai revealed a state bent on dominating regions far outside what aims of security and self-defense would mandate. Japan’s increasingly militant politicians and population, moreover, signaled a regime uninterested in upholding the rules of the international system. All of this provided clear and credible information about Japan’s revolutionary intentions. America and the international community responded appropriately.

There can be no doubt that Japan’s actions in Manchuria changed how the United States saw Japan’s revisionist intentions. But why was it that the Manchurian crisis proved so decisive in cementing American fears about Japan’s aims? As noted above, Japan’s control of Manchuria posed no inherent threat to the United States’ position in China or in Asia. American leaders did not see its economic interests, even the Open Door, as inherently threatened by Japanese expansion into Manchuria. At the onset of the crisis, Hoover argued for prudence, noting that there was “an absence of any United States interest in China important enough to invite or risk war.” Hornbeck likewise argued that U.S. trade and investment in China was “important but not essential.” As argued above, throughout the twentieth century officials accepted Japanese control over Manchuria as inevitable, that “Japan must have room for colonization, and that Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia are legitimate fields for her expansion.” As Stimson stated in his memoirs, “I do not recall that there was any difference of opinion whatever in our groups at the State department as to the policy we should follow in the face of this diagnosis of the situation in Manchuria.”

Even Japan’s use of force was understandable. While Washington saw Japan’s recourse to violence as unsettling, its aggression was neither unprecedented nor unexpected. In 1928, a similar incident had occurred in the Shandung-leased territory. With Chiang Kai-Shek’s forces moving northward, the Kwantung Army advanced into the city of Tsinan, occupying the city for over a year. The Americans remained quiet. Indeed, in a particularly prescient comment, Hornbeck remarked that “Japan evidently intends to draw a dividing line in China with Manchuria on one side and the Middle Kingdom on the other.” Hornbeck demonstrated little angst over the issue.

In 1931, U.S. policymakers were far from certain that Japan’s military actions in Manchuria signaled revolutionary aims, and indeed many saw Japanese aggression in Manchuria as unproblematic. United States diplomats believed the Manchurian incident was “no cause for surprise; it was only earlier and more drastic” than diplomats had expected. Given the chaos in China, and the state’s inability to impose law and order, Japan had to resort to force; its use of military might was likely to prove legitimate. As Ambassador Forbes put it, Japan “had a perfectly good case to take before the League of Nations and submit to any tribunal. They had developed
industry, transportation and agriculture for the benefit mostly of Chi-
inese inhabitants. . . . They had not received protection, the bandits were
regularly increasing their raids . . . and the Japanese got no protection or
redress." The American public concurred. In Manchuria, Walter Lippmann
commented, “there is here no such thing as an ‘aggressor’ and a ‘non-
aggressor.’” Both China and Japan had been pushed into Manchuria
through domestic and international pressures. The New York Times edito-
rial board noted that Japan enjoyed “admitted treaty rights” in Manchuria
and cautioned against aggressive diplomacy. For these reasons, Stimson
assured the Japanese ambassador that the United States would not “be
hasty in formulating conclusions or taking a position” in the face of the
Kwantung Army’s actions.

Not even the continuing offensive outside of Mukden or the attacks
on Shanghai communicated clear information about Japan’s intentions.
Scholars have argued that the spread of violence to Shanghai, for example,
exerted a profound effect on the American and British reaction to Japanese
aggression. But here again evidence suggests that the powers remained
uncertain about Japan’s aims. Japan had been aggressive in Shanghai, but
had also been willing to accept international mediation and limit conflict
over the city. Japan’s bombing of Shanghai was brutal, but Japan’s efforts
here faded so quickly that in April 1932 the New York Times dismissed it as
“only an episode”; the main action was to be found in Manchuria itself.56

The point here is not that Japan’s offensive did not cause concern; it is
that there was nothing inherent in Japan’s actions in Manchuria that sig-
naled revolutionary aims. Japan’s expansion into China could be seen a
signal of a radically expansionist agenda, or as a limited attempt to impose
order on a region central to its economic interest. As a signal, the meaning
of Manchuria was indeterminate.

THE POLITICS OF INTEREST

Another possibility is that in Manchuria the United States saw credible sig-
als that Japan would choose to threaten U.S. interests; that there were in-
creasing signs that Japan’s government harbored not limited, but revolu-
tionary interests; and that Manchuria would be a springboard toward more
expansionist policies. In particular, Manchuria demonstrated that Japan’s
“liberal internationalists” had lost control of Tokyo’s policies. In charge
now were revolutionary parties, military leaders and civilians who em-
braced nationalist and “renovationist” positions, and aimed to challenge
Western dominance in Asia.57 Manchuria was simply the opening salvo of a
“fifteen years war,” a constant spate of expansion that would propel Japan
further into China, Southeast Asia, and ultimately to attack the United
States at Pearl Harbor.
As plausible as this explanation sounds, it overstates the extent to which the invasion of Manchuria, in and of itself, provided a clear, costly signal of Japan’s regime type and budding revisionist interests. It is true that polarization had long plagued Japan’s government, and that Tokyo had taken a militarist turn. From 1931 to 1937, Japan saw eight governments, each seemingly more hardline than the last. Two months after the onset of the crisis, Minseito, the party most associated with Japan’s liberal internationalist goals, fell from power. By February 1932, Seiyukai, which had positioned itself as Japan’s foremost nationalist party, held the reins of power, but only for three months: in May 1932, an attempted right-wing coup brought about the end of Japan’s party competition, and the creation of a unity government under the leadership of a former navy admiral, Saito Makoto. From that point forward, there would be no more democratic party politics.

Yet Japanese politics and aims continued to be mired in uncertainty, not only in 1931 but through the end of the crisis in 1933. Throughout the crisis Japan’s domestic politics were far from settled: as Wilson argues, in 1931 “the situation as far more fluid than is often acknowledged, containing the possibility of outcomes other than those which did in fact occur; and that while the Manchurian Incident can be seen as a milestone in Japanese militarism, this is an interpretation which rests heavily in hindsight.” As the crisis unfolded, “revolutionary” hardliners—those that advocated expansion outside of Manchuria—were still outside the government. While Minseito was still in power, Shidehara attempted to subdue the army, with some success. Its rival, Seiyukai, might have been a hardline party, but it also fought back against renovationist and military dominance, and ultimately the truce with China quelled the rise of the hardliners. In other words, Manchuria was no clear victory for the hardliners, even at the end of the crisis. As one historian notes, for this reason most scholars “agree that the turning point in Japanese civil—military relations was the 2.26 Incident of 1936,” and not the Manchurian crisis itself.

Nor did the United States believe Japan’s regime instability was a clear indicator of revolutionary interests. At the outset of the crisis, American officials continued to believe that moderates were driving Japan’s policy. Early in the crisis, Stimson reported to Japan’s ambassador that the “American government is confident it has not been the intention of the Japanese government to create or be party” to the aggressive expansion in Manchuria. Grew too argued that there was a split between a “young military group” and “older and wiser” elements, most notably foreign minister Shidehara. Many officials in the Hoover administration suspected that the events were a replay of 1928, and that extremist elements in both Tokyo and the Kwantung Army were responsible for actions in Manchuria.

In essence, then, in 1931 there was no clear and costly signal of revolutionary interests. The initial stages of the invasion prompted, not certainty, but increased ambiguity about Japan’s intentions in Manchuria and beyond.
All of this strengthened, not undercut, the logic of accommodation. Indeed most in Washington thought that if the United States moved to contain Japan, “the Japanese nationalist element would be immensely strengthened and that it would unite Japan behind the military element”; pushing Japan toward more revisionist intentions was the United States’ “principal fear.”62 It was better, as Stimson argued, to “help Shidehara, who is on the right side, and not play into the hands of any Nationalist agitators on the other.”63

As the crisis unfolded, however, the United States became convinced that Japan’s invasion signaled unappeasable revisionist aims. These effects of the Manchurian crisis on U.S.-Japanese relations, I argue, cannot be reduced the politics of harm or interest, both of which proved indeterminate. It was not only Japan’s actions in Manchuria, but how the United States came to understand the meaning of Manchuria, that pushed it toward a containment strategy. Key to this interpretation, I argue, was Japan’s legitimation strategies, the reasons it gave for its expansion. Rather than appeal to existing norms and rules to justify their actions in Manchuria, during the crisis Japan’s leaders increasingly turned to the rhetoric of national emergency and Pan-Asianism to legitimate their aims. It was this framing that convinced the United States that Japan harbored revolutionary aims, objectives incompatible with the international order. Under these conditions, accommodation was no longer possible.

**Japan and the Politics of Legitimacy: From Liberal Internationalism to a New World Order**

In chapter 2, I argued that a rising power’s legitimation strategies shape great powers’ decision to accommodate, contain, or confront its revisionist ambitions. It is a rising power’s reasons for expansion that shape how great powers come to understand the extent of a challenger’s revisionist aims. Historians argue that Japan understood the power of language, and that it had, for at least forty years, portrayed its expansion as consistent with the rules and norms of the international system. Much has been written of Japan’s remarkable capacity to “assimilate” to Western institutions: its ability to quickly adopt a constitution after the Meiji restoration, to build a “Western-style” foreign ministry and military bureaucracy, is often credited with Japan’s success in avoiding China’s fate.64 Japan’s skillful use of international rules and norms to justify its early expansion was equally important in securing its role as a great power. Its expansion into Korea, into German holdings, and into Manchuria were accompanied by careful appeals to international treaties and law and, as Conroy argues, the fact that this expansion “was accomplished without opposition from the powers . . . that the Japanese continental position as established by the Twenty-one Demands
passed unchallenged . . . indicates how well the Japanese had built its case.”

Japan’s leaders, moreover, were well aware of the strategic benefits of their conformist rhetoric, and as they expanded they proceeded with “with great caution, with full attention to diplomatic arrangements, with Western arguments and justifications, with full consciousness of the strength of the west.” The content of Japan’s legitimation strategies can be separated into three phases. In the first phase, from 1895 to 1917, Japan relied on the language of what Iriye refers to as the “old diplomacy,” using rationales commensurate with a realist, balance-of-power system. In this argument, Japan’s right to claim Taiwan, Manchuria, or Korea stemmed from its growing might. Japan was justified in securing spheres-of-influence to guard against incursions from Russia and or hedge against Chinese instability. Such rights, after all, had been claimed by European nations for at least a century. As an editorial in the New York Tribune argued, Japan’s right to territorial expansion was “at least as good as that of Russia, France, England, or any other power to deal as they have with subject nations”.

At the end of World War I, Japan’s legitimations changed, largely in response to the U.S. pursuit of a liberal international order. Under Wilson, the Americans had a much different idea of what counted as “legitimate” expansion in the international order. Balance of power politics were anathema to the Wilson administration, and aggression only justified in cases of self-defense. Nations, moreover, were bound to accept others’ rights to self-determination, even if some of those nations, like China, were still struggling to articulate a national identity. It was inevitable, Japan’s prime minister Hara Takashi argued, that “America will take the lead in the world.” It was thus America that must be convinced that Japan’s aims were legitimate. In the second phase of Japan’s legitimation strategies, ranging from about 1918 to 1931, Japan adopted this rhetoric of a “new diplomacy” or “liberal internationalism.” Some of this change was strategic, a shift designed to convince an American audience that Japan’s expansionist aims in Manchuria were consistent with Wilsonian institutions. As Dickinson argues, “Hara’s strategy for coping with a powerful and meddlesome America was to commandeer the moral high ground on the most pressing problem: China’s civil war.” Other leaders sincerely embraced the principles of the liberal world order; Yoshino Sakuzo, one of the leaders of Japan’s democratic movement, applauded that the “rule of morality” was to replace the “rule of power.” Likewise, one journal editor proclaimed that Japan must join “Wilson’s great diplomatic revolution.”

Whatever the intentions that drove rhetoric, throughout the 1920s, Japan would argue that its interests in Manchuria were legal, that Japan sought, not to dominate in the name of security or interest, but to build a secure order in the region consistent with the rules of the international system. While continuing to fight for its “special rights” in Manchuria, Japan agreed to
recognize the fundamental norms of self-determination and liberal con-
straints against aggression. At the Versailles negotiations, Baron Makino
Nobuaki, “surprised all in attendance when he spoke on behalf of the new
diplomacy,” arguing that it was time to “work to expel oppressive and
scheming means, tread the path of righteousness, and make helping weak
country our principle.”72 Using this liberal internationalist rhetoric, Japan
“came into the critical 1930s with a record of successful expansion, accom-
plished by cautious and methodical means.”73

And while Japan’s leaders entered the decade committed to pursuing a
“vigorous policy in Manchuria” they “did not believe that this undertaking
would necessarily antagonize the United States or any other power”: they
continued to believe they had the diplomatic ammunition at hand to justify
their revisionist aims.74 In the Manchurian crisis, however, Japan’s legiti-
mation strategy took a third turn: it departed from the language of liberal
international order, and turned instead to a nationalist, pan-Asianist rheto-
ric. To analyze this shift I looked at Japan’s legitimating statements from
1931 to 1933 as recorded in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS).
Documents in FRUS give a thorough accounting of explanations Japan’s
leaders offered to the U.S. government about their actions in Manchuria,
which were conveyed to the U.S. ambassador in Japan, to the League of
Nations, and at times directly to the United States secretary of state. I also
supplement this analysis with reference to speeches by Japan’s leaders as
reported in the New York Times.

At the very beginning of the crisis, Japan continued its appeals to treaty
law and self-defense as justifications for their actions in Manchuria.75 To
Stimson, Japan’s ambassador reported that “it may be superfluous to
repeat that the Japanese government harbors no territorial designs in Man-
churia. What we desire is that Japanese subjects shall be enabled to safely
engage in various peaceful pursuits. It is the proper duty of a govern-
ment to protect the rights and interests legitimately enjoyed by the nation
or individuals.”76 Likewise, speaking in front of the League of Nations,
the Japanese representative argued that “her military and other measures
in China were justified as being ‘wholly defensive in character.’”77 Over
time, these claims of self-defense transformed into the language of existen-
tial threat, where any loss of control in Manchuria was an attack to Japan’s
economic “lifeline.” By the end of 1931, the expression Seimeisen (the line
between life and death) was among the most popular reasons given for
expansion in Japan’s media.78

As the crisis unfolded, this rhetoric of self-defense, while still prevalent,
was joined by a more revolutionary legitimation strategy: that Japan had
the right to build a new order in the Pacific. Japan’s leaders argued that
existing institutions of the Washington system—especially the principles
of the Nine Power Treaty—had failed in their efforts to bring peace and
order. As argued earlier, China’s right to self-determination was integral to
the Washington system: the ability of China to construct a stable, sovereign government was considered essential to maintaining peace and prosperity in the region. As Nish argues, “In the later stages of the [Manchurian] controversy, Japan tended more and more to rest her case upon the assertion that China had not that degree of political stability and power which would entitle her to claim or to be accorded the usual rights of a sovereign member of the international Society of States or the League of Nations.” In response to American demands that Japan justify its actions in terms of international treaties, Japan responded that Western treaties—both the Nine Power Treaty and the League of Nations—simply did not apply in Manchuria and China. As Japan’s foreign ministry wrote to Stimson, the Washington system no longer applied to China, as “the present unsettled and distracted state of China is not what was in the contemplation of the high contracting parties at the time of the Treaty of Washington.” China, Japan’s leaders argued, had not met the basic requirements to be considered a sovereign state. As Stimson observed, these claims that “China was not an organized state and that this fact relieved Japan from the obligation to carry out the covenants of the Nine power treaty . . . was thereafter regularly put forward by the Japanese government in its diplomatic utterances.” If China was not a state, then, Japan’s leaders argued, it was justified in using force in Manchuria beyond the requirements of “self-defense,” because of the disunity and disorder that racked the Chinese state.

The answer to the “Chinese problem,” Japan’s leaders argued, was to replace Western international norms with a new pan-Asianist order. Such pan-Asian rhetoric was not new to Japanese politics. Since at least the early twentieth century, “renovationists” in Japan had argued that Western treaties had done nothing but stymie Japan’s growth and that it was incumbent on leaders to revolutionaryize the order on the basis of a more traditional identity. But it was during the Manchurian crisis that these legitimations emerged as the dominant justification of Japan’s revisionist behavior. Only through expansion could Japan—and the rest of the great powers—secure peace and order in Asia. As Uchida Yasuya, who served as Japan’s foreign minister from 1932 to 1933, argued to League investigators, Japan had decades of experience dealing with Manchuria, whereas the Western powers understood little of Chinese politics. Uchida consistently denied that Japan had violated international law, but mixed these denials with frequent appeals to Japan’s cultural leadership in Asia. In a speech to the Imperial Diet in January 1933, he argued that the world must come to realize that “any plan for erecting an edifice of peace in the Far East should be based on the recognition that the constructive force of Japan is the mainstay of tranquility in this part of the world.”

The entire Washington system itself, Japan’s leaders now claimed, was built on a foundation of Western ignorance. The great powers had tried, as Japan’s diplomat Mamoru Shigemitsu argued, to impose their rules and
norms on Asia: “International relations in the Far East . . . cannot be properly controlled by an idealistic peace treaty or organization that might be suited to Europe.” The League, another Japanese official argued, “due to ignorance or otherwise, has done nothing but prolong the sufferings and strife in the Far East, thereby keeping unnecessarily the different countries in the Orient at daggers drawn, while they ought to have remained tied with strong bond of fraternity from both racial and other considerations.”

As Uchida explained, “It is admitted by those conversant with actual conditions in China that no remedy can be effected by having recourse either to the covenant of the League of Nations or to any other organ of what may be termed the ‘machinery of peace.’” Japan, Uchida proclaimed, would work with Asian partners “linked together by a bond of cultural and racial affinities, will come to cooperate hand in hand, for the maintenance and advancement of the peace and prosperity of the Far East, as well as for the peace of the world and the civilization of mankind.”

This rhetoric of a revolutionary Asian order eclipsed internationalist claims. As Mori Kaku argued, Japan’s interest in Manchuria could not be bound by “mere law or treaty.” Japan’s actions in Manchuria were a proclamation that she “now defiantly rose from her traditional diplomacy characterized by servility” and was building an order that would “return to the Japanese spirit.” It was nothing less than the abandonment of “sixty years of blind imitation of Western Materialistic civilization.” This pan-Asianist rhetoric would come to dominate how Japan legitimated its expansion, both during and after the crisis. In 1933, a Japanese journalist’s monograph was circulated to U.S. senators and representatives, which proclaimed that Japan was engaged in a “great experiment in the reorganization . . . of an ancient nation . . . For the first time in history, a non-white race has undertaken to carry the white man’s burden.” In 1934, Japan’s infamous Amo Doctrine declared that Japan had a “mission” to “maintain peace and order in that part of the world ‘on its own responsibility, acting alone.’” At times, Japan’s leaders even suggested that Japan’s new system would stretch not only through Asia, but around the globe. In an interview in early 1933, Japan’s representative to the League, Matsuoka, declared, “Japan’s mission is to lead the world spiritually and intellectually. Japan can offer spirituality to America and the entire Western World. Japan, I am convinced, will be the cradle of a new Messiah.”

By 1936, Japan was consistently deriding Western order as sterile and obsolete, proclaiming Japan’s ideology the order of the future.

In sum, in the half century of Japan’s rise, its legitimation strategies changed dramatically, shifting from a rhetoric that first embraced and then rejected the principles of existing Western institutions to one that proclaimed a revolutionary world order. Japanese legitimation strategies had a profound effect on American foreign policy, pushing officials away from a policy of impartiality and even accommodation in the crisis, to a policy
of containment through nonrecognition. As one historian argues, while this was not the first time the United States had faced Japanese expansion in the Pacific, yet “if on former occasions the United States had ignored the display of Japanese power, it could hardly do so in 1931. . . . While recognizing both Japan’s need for raw materials and foreign markets as well as its special treaty privileges in Manchuria, the president rejected the Japanese rationale for the employment of force.”

Daft Language and Deaf Ears: The Dynamics of U.S.-Japanese Legitimation

In the sections below, I argue that legitimation strategies had a significant effect on power politics: by signaling that Japan could not be restrained, by galvanizing opponents, and by threatening the United States’ sense of its identity, Japan’s rhetoric shaped how the United States mobilized in response to its expansion, laying the groundwork for a containment strategy. Why was it that Japan’s leaders turned to language that would be illegitimate to its great power audience? Surely Japan’s leaders understood such rhetoric would prove illegitimate to an American audience and potentially provoke a response. Likewise, why did Japan’s rhetoric have such a profound effect on American strategy? How was it that “cheap talk” pushed the powers toward confrontation?

On the face of it, there is an obvious answer to both questions: Japan’s rhetoric was, in fact, a credible signal of its type. As argued in chapter 2, rationalist theory would predict that revolutionary actors will, at least eventually, turn to rhetoric to mobilize their populations behind revolutionary aims. For this reason, illegitimate rhetoric is a costly signal that will rationally provoke a response from its audience. But there are problems with this explanation. There is little to indicate that, in 1931, Japan’s leaders were purposively using illegitimate rhetoric to mobilize their population for an expansionist project. Evidence suggests that Japan’s expansionist aims remained as limited as they were in the previous decades: there was a dispute, as Iriye puts it “over the execution of policy, not over the policy itself.” Some of Japan’s leaders were more nationalist in their approach, but as Nish argues, it was “far from united,” and many party members shared the belief that cooperation with the great powers remained the best way to advance Japan’s interests in Manchuria. Looking only at preferences it would be, as Matsusaka argues, difficult, if not impossible, to have “foreseen the scope and scale of Japanese aggression.” While there was plenty of revolutionary rhetoric, there is little evidence of revolutionary aims, that in 1931 Japan had decided to embark on a “fifteen year war” to expand far beyond Manchuria and into southern China and eventually southeast Asia.

It may have been the United States saw Japan’s rhetoric as a costly signal of mobilization nonetheless. But here again, there are holes in this story.
The United States took Japan’s rhetoric as a clear and credible signal of its type, strong evidence that Japan was revolutionary state, despite the wealth of costly signals suggesting Japan’s aims might remain limited: its retreat from Shanghai; the government’s refusal to recognize an independent Manchukuo for eight months after the Kwantung Army declared independence; its agreement to a truce and the relative calm between Japan and China from 1933 to 1936. Indeed, what we seem to have is a case of what Mitzen and Schweller call “misplaced certainty” where American officials grew strangely confident in their interpretation of signals and ended up overstating the clarity of Japan’s aims. Some historians argue that this misplaced certainty was not only irrational but tragic. Convinced of Japan’s revolutionary type, the United States adopted “foreign policy that unintentionally weakened those political elements in Japan that favored accommodation with the United States, cooperative membership in the League of Nations, and the peaceful resolution of international tensions.” This suggests a troubling counterfactual, that had the U.S. government continued to support Shidehara in late fall of 1931, if Stimson had not announced a formal nonrecognition, more restrained parties may have kept the reins of power in Japan.

We are left then with the twin puzzles of why Japan’s leaders abandoned an internationalist legitimation strategy, and why the Americans responded so strongly, perhaps even irrationally, to mere talk. To explain this, the next sections turn to the conditions introduced in chapter 2: the rising power’s capacity for multivocal legitimation and the great power’s institutional vulnerability. These combined to make Japan’s rhetoric strongly dissonant, a potent signal of revolutionary aims.

**The Revisionist’s Dilemma: Japan’s Rhetorical Turn**

As argued in the sections above, for decades Japan had successfully legitimated their territorial expansion, conforming to the rules and norms of the international system to explain their actions in Manchuria. Now its leaders rejected these norms and rules, instead appealing to a hyper-nationalist, pan-Asianist, and “renovationist” order to justify their aims. Japan’s leaders understood the risks of such rhetoric, and they continued to try to legitimate their claims in Manchuria to an international audience. During the crisis Japan embarked on a campaign of both official and public diplomacy designed to “persuade Western and especially US audiences of the justice of Japan’s cause, with an energy which shows that they neither desired nor necessarily expected to be cut off from the international community as a result of the Manchurian crisis.” Members of the government spoke directly to American presses, in attempts to convince the public of the legitimacy of Japan’s aims. But without the treaty language, Japan’s claims fell on deaf ears.
How can we explain this shift in legitimation strategies? As argued in chapter 2, rising powers face a dilemma when rhetoric that appeals to an international audience will sound dissonant to a domestic one. Under these conditions, leaders face an unenviable choice: appealing to an international audience might stem containment and confrontation, but will lead to ruin at home; appealing to a domestic coalition might mobilize masses at home, but provoke outrage abroad. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japan’s leaders faced a severe dilemma. On the one hand there were “internationalist” parties, leaders that had largely dominated Japan’s government since World War I. These internationalists, such as Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijuro, Prime Minister Hara Takashi, and many of the members of the Kenseikai (later Minseito) Party, embraced the language of Woodrow Wilson’s “new diplomacy.”103 Japan, Shidehara argued, would turn the postwar peace “to its good advantage by rectifying the past mistakes of dual diplomacy . . . militaristic politics, and diplomacy dominated by military cliques.”104 Following Versailles, Kenseikai’s leaders proclaimed that the “real essence of the ‘new thought’ was democracy at home and a great attention to world peace over national rights abroad.”105

In contrast, renovationist coalitions argued that “Western” norms and rules were fundamentally corrupt and incompatible with Japan’s national identity.106 Interestingly the expansionist aims of the renovationists differed little from the internationalists, at least in the period before 1936.107 Like the internationalists, most renovationists were primarily concerned with expanding into Manchuria; they were not seeking a hegemonic, Asian empire. But whatever their aims, renovationists were “contemptuous of Western-style justification for Japan’s expansionist activities,” and as a result “they developed as the ideological basis of Japanese expansion the mission of the resurrection of Asia, with Japan as the deliverer, the guide, the hero of the Eastern world.”108 During World War I, renovationists such as Yamagata Aritomo argued that Japan must pursue “self-protection of Asians and for the coexistence and co-prosperity of China and Japan,” foreshadowing Japan’s foreign policy of the late 1930s. After Versailles, renovationists condemned what they saw as Japan’s genuflection toward Western institutions. Konoe Fumimaro, who in 1937 would become Japan’s prime minister, castigated the League of Nations as a “tool for shoring up Anglo-American power,”109 and likewise Ito Miyoji argued that the League would only preserve the “status quo of the Anglo-Saxon race” and “restrict the future development” of rising powers.110

Scholars have suggested Japan’s turn to hardline rhetoric stemmed from this polarization in domestic politics. As Jack Snyder argues, for example, it was the logrolling among Japan’s fragmented elites that led to hardline rhetoric.111 Yet, other cases in this book demonstrate that, under some conditions, leaders can manage polarization: in both the United States and Prussia, leaders resisted the turn to revolutionary rhetoric. It was not only
fragmentation, but an inability to use multivocal rhetoric, that doomed the internationalist enterprise. Unlike their counterparts in the United States and Prussia, Japan’s leaders did not bridge coalitions; instead they were positioned either as speakers for “liberal-internationalist” coalitions, like Minseito, or as leaders of nationalist and renovationist movements. Japan lacked a Quincy Adams or a Bismarck: leaders did not cross internationalist and renovationist lines.

This meant that the battle for legitimation quickly became a zero-sum game: leaders could either appeal to internationalist or renovationist principles to justify their policies, but not both. At the beginning of Japan’s expansion, the inability to make multivocal appeals was insignificant: liberal internationalism was the dominant discourse, both at home and abroad. By 1931, however, liberal-internationalism was in the midst of a legitimation crisis. A worldwide depression undercut liberal principles, the claim that commitment to Western economic institutions would ensure continued growth. As Matsusaka argues, “The global economic crisis did more than any imperialist polemic to discredit the claims of the new diplomacy.” Liberal-internationalist rhetoric was further discredited as security institutions began to weaken. In the wake of the London Naval Conference of 1930, when the United States and England refused to accept Japan’s demands for an increased cruiser fleet, Japan’s military saw an opportunity to mount a “public awareness campaign aimed at the ‘popularization of national defense thought.’”

Even before explosions rocked Manchuria, internationalist discourse was in decline. And as “world events made Japanese opinion still more disenchanted with the foreign ministry views of things, the ideas [of the renovationists] put forth in 1917 and 1918 lay ready to offer an alternative.” In the face of this legitimation crisis, these internationalists attempted a multivocal strategy, in a last attempt to appease audiences at home and abroad. Japan’s liberal leaders—especially Shidehara—realized the dilemma they were in. They hoped to justify their actions to a Western audience, while remaining “conscious of their weakness and the need to cultivate popularity” among the Japanese public. To their domestic audience, liberal internationalist leaders increasingly invoked renovationist rhetoric to justify Japan’s presence in Manchuria. In November and December of 1930, for example, the foreign minister decried “Chinese plans to ‘encircle’ the SMR and drive the company into the ‘jaws of death.’” At the same time, Minseito attempted to assure the Americans that Japan’s aims in Manchuria were limited, and it had no plans to abandon the Nine Power Treaty or the Washington system in the Asia-Pacific.

Minseito’s leaders, however, lacked the resources to make multivocal claims. To Stimson, Shidehara’s appeals to renovationist principles now only made him question the sincerity of his intentions. To the Japanese public, Minseito’s internationalist appeals suggested the party was, at best, “spineless” in its foreign policy and, at worst, committing “treason.”
At home Minseito’s leaders had little authority to make claims in the name of renovationist language. As one historian argues, “Shidehara and Minseito had not put down political roots” with renovationist coalitions.\footnote{118} If renovationist language was now the dominant legitimation strategy, there were actors with far more authority to speak it than the leaders of Minseito.

Instead of managing cross pressures, Japan’s leaders turn to renovationist language opened up space for this rhetoric to dominate politics: by 1932 all of groups in Japan—\textit{regardless} of the extent of their expansionist aims—were using renovationist rhetoric to legitimate their claims in Manchuria. Even if leaders wanted to stave off international mobilization against their efforts, they found themselves locked into a rhetoric that undercut these strategic interests. Seiyukai’s prime minister Inukai Tsuyoshi, for example, still hoped to negotiate a settlement over Manchuria, yet was unable to justify working with an international organization or within the boundaries of the Washington treaties. Instead, his speeches were “self-consciously nationalist. In this atmosphere, the liberal and international voices were hardly heard.”\footnote{119}

Within Japan the rise of renovationist rhetoric had tragic feedback effects: once “moderates” embraced renovationist rhetoric, they legitimated the most extreme positions in Japan’s politics. Seiyukai’s leaders, for example, found that their reliance on revolutionary language increased the influence of truly renovationist actors—such as Mori Kaku—who were then able to seize power within the increasingly fragmented state. In March 1932, Seiyukai’s prime minister was assassinated. While the successor to the premiership was relatively moderate, renovationists seized control of key ministries in Japan’s cabinet. Amongst these leaders were those who would formulate Japan’s push toward domination in the late 1930s. Hirota Koki, executed after the war for Class A war crimes, was appointed foreign minister in 1933. Konoe Fumimaro now led Japan’s house of peers. Matsuoka, who would serve as Konoe’s foreign minister, now represented Japan at the League, and would lead the nation out of the institution in 1933.

Japan’s political factions had unleashed a tiger they could not control. Whatever the aims of the leaders, the only rhetoric available to legitimate expansion was renovationist, nationalist, and militaristic in its content, and revolutionary in its words if not in its actions. Once committed to a revolutionary rhetoric, Japan’s parties left themselves vulnerable to political outflanking by extremists who could claim much more authority and credibility in speaking to domestic constituencies. With internationalism thoroughly delegitimated, there could be no accommodation with the United States. Japan was now locked into a conflict, not only against China but against the international order. And on the rules of the international system, there could be no compromise.
“Scraps of Paper”: The Institutional Vulnerability of American Foreign Policy

The theory developed in chapter 2 suggests that illegitimate rhetoric is not enough to provoke mobilization; legitimation strategies only resonate when a great power sees itself as institutionally vulnerable, dependent on an unsettled institutional order. The argument that the United States was “institutionally vulnerable” in the interwar period might seem strange: many see the United States as a radically isolationist nation after World War I. The United States rejection of the League, for example, is a story known well enough not to be rehashed here. Throughout the Manchurian crisis American officials remained uneasy with League institutions, at times seeming eager to participate in League negotiations, at others purposively eschewing formal institutions and pursuing a unilateral policy.

Yet American rejection of the League was not a rejection of liberal institutional order. At the end of the war, the United States committed itself to building a new institutional structure in the Pacific, one that would replace imperial relations and the balance of power with a system that secured free trade, guaranteed self-determination, and dampened down military competition through arms control agreements. Key to this architecture were the treaties signed at the Washington Conference in fall of 1921. The Washington system, as Iriye argues, was a push toward liberal global governance, an effort to “demolish the existing system of imperialist diplomacy” and put in its place an institutional “mechanisms designed to harmonize the divergent interests of the great powers.” The Five Power Treaty between the United States, Britain, France, Japan, and Italy, for example, limited naval forces and banned gas warfare. The Four Power Treaty committed the United States, Britain, France, and Japan to consult with each other in the event of crisis. And the Nine Power Treaty, as described earlier, rearticulated the Open-Door policy and committed states to China’s sovereignty.

Far from viewing international institutions as undercutting American isolationism, moreover, the treaties were seen as critical to the United States’ economic and security position and its efforts to replace balance-of-power politics with “multinational agreements repudiating expansionism.” If states fulfilled the disarmament pledges in the Washington Naval Treaty, for example, the United States could then decrease its own naval spending and commitments, and draw back from projecting power across the Pacific. It was for this reason that Senator Henry Cabot Lodge—a fierce opponent of the League—acted as one of the delegates to the conference and defended the agreement to remaining “irreconcilables” in the U.S. Congress. Likewise, it was through the Nine Power Treaty that the United States could protect its economic access to China, without raising the specter of European imperialism. Without the treaty the United States would have been forced into “a frank acceptance of the full implication of the spheres
of interest idea and a resort without reservation to the principles of self-interest and self-help,” principles anathema to U.S. foreign policy.\(^\text{124}\) And it was only in a world of nonaggression that the United States could eschew alliance structures believed so dangerous for world peace. President Harding pronounced the treaties a “new state of mind” for world politics, where dangerous balance-of-power politics would no longer hold sway.\(^\text{125}\)

For all of these reasons, these institutions were no mere “scraps of paper.” As Stimson wrote in his diary: “The question of the ‘scraps of paper’ is a pretty crucial one. We have nothing but ‘scraps of paper.’”\(^\text{126}\) The United States could not afford to let “Japan run amok and play havoc with its peace treaties.”\(^\text{127}\) Evidence suggests these treaties had not only elite but broad public support. Congress ratified the treaties with strong majorities, even gaining support from members who had opposed the League (the naval treaty was opposed by only one vote).\(^\text{128}\) The *New York Times* praised American leaders’ “practical idealism” in negotiating the treaties.\(^\text{129}\)

Despite its popularity in the United States, by the late 1920s, the Washington system was seen as increasingly unsettled. Iriye, for example, suggests the system was flailing as early as 1925, when the great powers failed to agree on China’s right to tariff autonomy at the Peking Tariff Conference. By the 1930s, the system was under significant strain, as great power policy toward China grew more unilateral.\(^\text{130}\) By the close of the decade, the powers were struggling to coordinate on issues of naval power and regional free trade. By 1930, the powers’ failure to reach agreement at the London Naval Conference was placing additional strain on the treaty, and the worldwide depression and increasingly protectionist policies tore at the Washington system’s liberal economic foundations.

The United States, in other words, entered the Manchurian crisis as an institutionally vulnerable power, committed to a treaty system that was highly unsettled. Under these conditions, any attack on the institutional order—even if symbolic and rhetoric—was unacceptable. Once Japan turned to the rhetoric of a new world order, Stimson feared that at stake was the entire system of international law, and that “great post-war effort to place the world upon a higher level of international life was in jeopardy.”\(^\text{131}\) As he stated bluntly, “In the light of treaties and principles of world welfare, it is a challenge to the whole world.”\(^\text{132}\) Hornbeck similarly argued that Japan was taking on the Powers, and “if Japan won, “the principle that ‘might is right’ will have been substantially reinforced.”\(^\text{133}\) The same American policymakers who had long urged accommodation of Japan’s aims, argued that “our position is clear as crystal: we hold no brief for either side in the Sino-Japanese dispute; we hold a brief for the inviolability of the international peace treaties.”\(^\text{134}\) As Stimson argued in 1932, the United States might have “no desire to become Japan’s rival in Manchuria” but “he and the people of this country felt that this pact was of the utmost importance to the
United States and to the civilized world and in the event that it came to a question between permitting the destruction of that peace treaty on the one hand and annoying Japan on the other, he would unhesitatingly . . . take his stand for the preservation of the treaty.”

In sum, it was this configuration of speaker and audience that ensured Japan’s legitimation strategies were strongly dissonant. In the midst of a crisis, Japan’s leaders found themselves unable to make multivocal claims and, instead, moved toward a revolutionary rhetoric. While a more secure United States might have seen this rhetoric for what it was—a desperate attempt to maintain power at home—an institutionally vulnerable United States took cheap talk at its word, moving to protect its “scraps of paper” at great cost.

**Japan Unbound: The American Reaction to Japan’s Legitimation Strategies**

In chapter 2, it was argued that dissonant strategies will have powerful effects on great power mobilization. As argued above, events in Manchuria in 1931 were troubling, but not fatal to U.S.-Japanese relations, so long as Japan could explain why its actions remained within the boundaries of the Washington system. From the outset of the crisis in September 1931, the United States and the international community demanded that the Japanese government provide reasons for its actions, to explain not only what it intended in Manchuria, but why. Officials claimed Japanese officials could very well have a “good case” for their intervention. As Japan remained silent about its reasons the first few days of the crisis, the American audience grew frustrated. Stimson pressed Japan’s ambassador and its foreign minister for an explanation of the invasion, placing the role of the treaties as core to Japan’s legitimacy:

I pointed out to him the seriousness of the situation when treaty promises began to be broken; I reminded him that the nine power treaty was one of a group of treaties mutually dependent . . . I asked him what was left on which we could rest for the stability of the world when treaty obligations began to be broken; I reminded him of the many times I had spoken of Japan as a stabilizing influence in the world and asked him if he thought I could do so now.

The media, too, seemed wary of Japan’s silence. As the New York Times put it:

No impartial person who has followed the Japanese course in China . . . can fail to conclude that Japan has lacked what is called ‘good publicity.’ She had, in many respects, a good case. She was entitled to stand upon her treaty rights. . . . But apparently the Japanese government did not have that decent respect for the opinion of mankind which would have led her to explain and justify her position in the face of hostile criticism.
Japan’s reasons for invading Manchuria, in other words, were of tremendous significance to U.S. officials. And because Japan’s claims were dissonant, they had three effects on U.S. mobilization: they signaled Japan could not be restrained by treaty; they amplified voices for containment in the United States; and they framed Japan’s actions in Manchuria as an existential threat to the U.S. order. All of these effects meant the United States moved toward mobilizing its forces toward containment and confrontation.

**Signaling Revolutionary Aims**

As argued above, throughout the early twentieth century, as Japan rose to prominence, the United States harbored no illusions about Japan’s revisionist aims. It foresaw that Japan’s increasing power meant that it would naturally seek to modify political, economic, and territorial arrangements in its backyard. Already the United States had accommodated, even encouraged, expansion into China and Korea and, in 1931, there was no sign that the United States would push back against further expansion in the region. Economically, many American officials accepted the Japanese government’s argument that it must expand in areas like Manchuria in order to secure the resources and territorial necessary to its economic livelihood.140 Politically, American officials viewed Japan’s dominance in Manchuria as the “least of all evils,” suggesting that Japanese control of Manchuria might be the only source of stability in a chaotic region.141

Whatever Japan’s ambitions, however, its language suggested that the country would be constrained through her institutional ties, particularly by its position within the Washington Conference treaties. Much of this signaling of constraint was rhetorical: no leader in Japan ever abandoned or denied Japan’s interest in Manchuria, and the United States was well aware of its aims. Yet the rhetoric continued to signal that was not a revolutionary state and would play by the approved rules of the Washington treaties.142 As John Gittings argues, “Japan was allowed to go so far because the Western powers believed it would keep its imperialist appetite (which they shared) within bounds.”143 Japan, another scholar argues, “had been admitted to the same club as the Western powers and was to be permitted to play the imperialist game by the same rules, so long as open clashes with the treaties were avoided.”144 American officials and media alike referred to Japan as a good citizen of the global order, despite its efforts to exert control over Manchuria. Even opponents of Japanese expansion conceded that Japan was now working within the boundaries of the treaty. MacMurray, for example, suggested that Japanese power in “East Asia must be accepted” as Japan had been “scrupulously loyal in its adherence to the letter and spirit of the Washington conference.”145
As Japan’s rhetorical took a revolutionary turn during the Manchurian crisis, it proved a potent signal of revolutionary ambition. Grew, for example, expressed his frustration with Japan’s insistence that the treaties did not apply to Manchuria, arguing that:

I have a great deal of sympathy with Japan’s legitimate aspirations in Manchuria, but no sympathy at all with the illegitimate way in which Japan has been carrying them out. One can have little sympathy with the . . . typically Prussian methods pursued in Manchuria and Shanghai since September 18, 1931, in the face of the Kellogg Pact, the Nine Power Treaty, and the Covenant of the League of Nations.146

As Wilson argues, this was not simply a reaction to Japan’s actions in Manchuria, its increased use of military might. As Grew noted, even the use of force might have been acceptable if Japan’s politicians could have justified it “somehow within the framework of the international covenants.”147

The commentary of public intellectuals and the media supports this argument as well.148 At the beginning of the crisis, much of the public discussion suggests uncertainty as to the legitimacy of Japan’s actions, and whether or not they could be accommodated within the existing treaty structure. Many Americans, both policymakers and the public alike, were confused by Japan’s refusal to invoke the treaties to legitimate their behavior. Japan had considerable justification for going into China. Japan, as the New York Times editorial board noted “enjoys admitted treaty rights” in Manchuria and was acting no differently than the United States had in Haiti when unrest threatened core interests.149 One commentator remarked that Japan “might even have been asked by the power to go in and restore to Manchuria that order and safety which China was not maintaining.”150 As Japanese representatives increased their verbal attacks on the treaties, the papers changed course. Now, they argued that, as James Shotwell put it, “When the Japanese troops stormed Mukden in the early morning of September 19 last, they attacked something more than the ancient capital of the Manchus. The edifice of international peace which had been built upon the ruins of the World War was shaken by the impact of the blow as much as the Chinese republic.”151

It was because Japan’s reasons were illegitimate—because it rejected the rules and norms governing the Washington system—that U.S. officials now saw a rising power unrestrained by treaty obligations. Japan now seemed a power willing to mobilize the most hardline elements in its society. Before the change in Japan’s rhetoric, officials, especially Stimson, believed Japanese officials like Shidehara were doing their best to contain radical nationalist coalitions within Japan. Shidehara, Stimson claimed, was in a “very difficult,” position attempting to stave off extremist elements in the government.152 But as Japan’s leaders adopted a nationalist rhetoric, so too did U.S.
officials see this as an attempt to concede to, and ultimately mobilize, the hardline revisionists.

More broadly, Japan’s legitimation strategies signaled the state would cast off the treaties of the Washington system. For this reason, Japan’s expansion in Manchuria, efforts that Americans had earlier found acceptable, were now seen as evidence of Japan’s insatiable revisionism. In the face of Japan’s rhetorical defiance, the United States began to engage in what LaFeber calls “domino theory” thinking: whereas Japan’s rhetoric had once signaled constraint, now it seemed to suggest a power unresponsive to global governance. Hornbeck, for example, proclaimed that Japan could no longer “be deterred by treaty obligations or moral suasion.” He argued that “in light of existing circumstances and conditions, it would appear probable that Japan will continue to work for the realization of a Japanese hegemony in Eastern Asia and that the United States will be the leading power most strongly opposed to the consummation of that objective.” Japan was not quelling “local disorders,” but pursuing “a carefully prepared and far-reaching plan” to dominate South Manchuria. Eventually, by this reasoning, Japan would declare a “Monroe Doctrine” in East Asia; Manchuria was simply the first step in driving the United States out of all of Asia. There was no room for partnership with a revolutionary power. As Grew would remark after the crisis, any new pact would fail: “If you can’t find a rock to build your house on, but only sand, it’s much safer not to build a house at all.” As Iriye argues, this perception of Japan as an unbound and insatiable revisionist greatly exaggerated Tokyo’s aims in the Pacific, which, at least from 1931 to 1933, remained consistent with its limited goals of the previous decade. But in the face of illegitimate rhetoric, Japan now appeared a rising power that would and could not be restrained.

Rhetorical Coercion: Amplifying the Voices of Containment

Even before the occupation of Manchuria, some officials were arguing the United States must check Japan’s expansion in East Asia. From World War I onward, a segment of the foreign policy establishment, particularly in the State Department, declared that Japan, if left unchecked, would become a regional hegemon, one driven to expel the United States from the Pacific. Japan’s critics grew particularly vocal as Japan attempted to formalize its claims to Manchuria in the wake of that war. The U.S. minister to China, Paul Reinsch, denounced the Twenty-One Demands as the “greatest crisis ever experienced in China.” If Japan succeeded, the United States would lose the Open Door, and “the independence of China and equal opportunity of western nations are at stake.” Another State Department official argued Tokyo’s demands signaled an intention “to work out her salvation and that of China as well upon the basis of ‘Asia for the Asiatics,’ and
would allow Japan to quickly become powerful enough to deprive the United States of its interests in the region. MacMurray, then chief of the Far Eastern division of the State Department, argued that it was necessary for “restoring the equilibrium in the far East which has been so dangerously upset by Japan’s process of aggrandizement.” Likewise Hornbeck argued that Japan had an informal “Monroe Doctrine” for Asia and that it would expand into all of China, posing a major threat to the United States in the process.

So long as Japan’s rhetoric adhered to the “new diplomacy” and the Washington system, such proclamations seemed misguided. Some diplomats, such as Reinsch, were forced to abandon their arguments in the face of Japan’s turn to Wilsonianism. Others, such as MacMurray and Hornbeck, appear to have changed their mind in light of Japan’s embrace of the treaties. As Japan moved toward a revolutionary legitimation strategy during the Manchurian crisis, however, these critics of accommodation were emboldened. As Japan adopted a revolutionary rhetoric, Hornbeck began to argue that the United States must provide “some sort of official denunciation of Japan as a lawbreaker.” He argued that Japan was waging “two campaigns: one against China, military; the other against the Powers, diplomatic. She has won in the former every battle; and she has at no point been defeated in the latter.” The time was thus “fast approaching when the Powers would either have to ‘put up or shut up.’”

Still there were factions in the State Department who argued accommodation should continue to dominate American policy. Many of these calls came from self-proclaimed realists, who argued that the United States had neither the will nor the capacity to confront Japan over Manchuria. Even before the crisis in Manchuria, Castle had urged caution in the call to enforce the Washington treaties: Japan’s increasing power, Castle suggested, meant that the status quo would have to change. Japan, he argued, was the United States’ “one useful friend in the Orient” and advised Hoover to acknowledge Japan’s interests in China. Forbes and Grew, both ambassadors to Japan, worked to, in Forbes words, “keep the United States from being too insistent upon checking Japan.” Again, this was simple realism. As Grew wrote, there was “no treaty which runs counter to the inexorable facts of history and economic necessity can in any case wholly restrain [Japan’s] penetration in Manchuria. . . . She is there to stay unless conquered in war. For nations,” he argued, “the moral disapproval of others may change their conception of what constitute justifiable aggression, but only if that disapproval threatens to entail social or economic disadvantages or losses of a practical and material nature.” If the United States was not willing to “fight” Japan over Manchuria, they should learn to “like it.”

But Japan’s legitimation strategies undercut these realist arguments. Realists could not deny that Japan had violated the fundamental principles of
the Washington system. As much as they encouraged a prudent response, it was difficult to push back against a condemnation of Japan’s actions, even if they saw declarations such as the Stimson Doctrine as counterproductive and inflammatory. Castle continued to insist that “I am convinced that selfish interests make it imperative that we have Japan as a friend in the western Pacific,” but conceded that this could only happen “so long at least as Japan maintains an ethical code which we can recognize.”

Grew urged the Hoover administration to remain impartial to China and Japan, but also recognized that the United States could not abandon the treaties.

In essence, the voices of accommodation could no longer make the case that Japan could be treated as a reliable treaty partner. In the face of Japanese rhetoric, Castle could not convince Hoover to reduce the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, a continuing source of tension between the two nations. And certainly they could not stop the policy of nonrecognition, even though many saw it as an overblown bluff, nothing more than “Pusillananimous administrators putting forth words or threats, behind which there is no preparation for deeds,” as Forbes described it. Many of these realists expressed frustration at their inability to counter Stimson and Hornbeck’s move toward a more confrontational policy. Hugh R. Wilson, the U.S. representative to Geneva and a friend of Grew, argued that he “felt like bursting into tears” over Stimson’s nonrecognition:

Mr. Stimson . . . had every legal right to take and maintain the position which he did. . . . But you know and I know that the endeavor to place humanity within a rigid framework of legal restriction has never yet succeeded. . . . We need not have done any of these things in such a way as to make us . . . the leaders in what Mr. Stimson called “mobilizing world opinion against Japan.”

In sum, so long as Japan had invoked liberal institutionalist norms, the voices of containment had been silenced. But as Japan’s rhetoric turned revolutionary, it amplified arguments that it was, indeed, a threat to the United States. These actors could now argue that containment was the only policy consistent with the U.S. order. Mobilization against Japan was now necessary.

**Identity and Existential Threats: Japan’s Attack on the American Order**

Finally, Japan’s shift in rhetoric constructed an image of Japan as an existential threat to the United States, a danger to its very identity as a liberal, treaty-abiding nation. In Japan’s attack on Manchuria, U.S. officials came to see, not merely aggression against China, but an offensive against the Washington system and even the entirety of the post–World War I governance structure as a whole. As Hornbeck argued, in Manchuria, Japan had
taken on two contests: in invading China, it had embarked on a conflict with China, largely stemming from China’s failure to “live up to elementary international obligations”; but in denying the force of treaties, Japan was engaging in a contest against “the Powers of the World” by failing “to observe the conventions . . . which now prevail among the members of the “Family of Nations.””

As argued above, the belief that Japan posed an existential threat cannot be reduced to its material might. In 1931, Japan had neither the ability nor interest in threatening U.S. holdings in the Philippines or Hawaii, or in undercutting its economic interests in China. For this reason, scholars often emphasize the role that race played in shaping U.S. perceptions of Japan: it was Japan’s status a racial “other” that made its revisionist demands so frightening. There is no doubt that race shaped U.S.-Japan relations and diplomacy. Local discriminatory legislation, such as San Francisco’s segregation of schools, fueled Japan’s resentment toward the United States. As early as 1915, officials in the State Department and the British Foreign Office were warning of a “‘Yellow Peril’ that threatened to impose “a Japanese Monroe doctrine on China, and a cry of ‘the Far East for the Far Easterns.’” Race shaped critical discussions at Versailles when the European powers rejected the racial nondiscrimination clause, cementing Japan’s status as a “second-tier” power in world politics. Throughout the Manchurian crisis, race permeated much of the discourse surrounding assessments of Japan as a threat in East Asia. Grew suggested, for example, that Japan was “menacing because of its national spirit”: “The force of a nation bound together with great moral determination, fired with national ambition, and peopled by a race with unbounded capacity for courageous self-sacrifice is not easy to overcome.”

Officials worried that Japan’s actions signaled the nation was “working steadily toward the exclusion of . . . the white man from the Pacific.”

As powerful as was the role race played in U.S.-Japanese relations, it neither had a determinative effect on U.S. policy toward Japan, nor doomed these two states to confrontation and conflict. Indeed, in the early twentieth century and especially after Versailles, American officials often spoke of Japan as a kindred spirit in institution building, a partner in creating a civilized, liberal order in East Asia. Japan’s adherence to Western diplomacy and industrialization had made her “the pioneer of progress in the Orient.” As Japan expanded into Korea and Manchuria at the start of the century, Americans extolled the rising power as “the Great Britain of Asia” and the “Yankees of the East.” Throughout the 1920s, American officials praised Japan’s commitment to the Washington treaties, its willingness to take the lead in promoting the new diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. And on the eve of the crisis in Manchuria, official correspondence and media reports alike were far more likely to cast Japan as a member of Western “civilization” rather than as a threat.
Moreover Japan’s initial incursions into Manchuria did not, on their own, shift the perceptions of Japan as a long-standing partner in the international order: the actions themselves were indeterminate. At the onset of the crisis, Stimson warned against overreaction, arguing that Japan had demonstrated an “exceptional record of good citizenship in the life of the international world,” and was thus unlikely to pose a threat to the United States. Hornbeck built on this in a memo, arguing that “Japan as an agent of civilization should have a premier position in Manchuria. . . . If any nation is to be the mandatory for this neglected corner of the earth with its important undeveloped resources, every consideration indicates Japan.” Even if Japan were to challenge the Open Door, this might be acceptable, provided Japan continue to act as a reliable member of the liberal order: “If we compel a strict interpretation of the ‘open door’ in Manchuria may not doors be rudely burst open elsewhere which are now closed to Japanese; say in California?” The media concurred with the official assessment, that Japan was no “other,” but a reliable partner in the Washington system. Japan, reminded the New York Times, had long sought to take a position “among the civilized nations.” Even as violence persisted, the op-ed pages claimed that Japan’s officials “must still desire, as for years past they have shown that they do, to stand well with the civilized nations.”

But as Japan’s rhetoric rejected the norms of Washington system, instead embracing the revolutionary language of a Pan-Asian order, so too did U.S. perceptions of Japan change: Japan became, not a partner in the liberal system, but an existential threat. Japan’s pronouncements were in direct contrast with the identity of the United States. As one State Department memo noted, “As Prussian ideals and aspirations were in conflict with the rights and interest of Great Britain, so Japan’s ideals and aspirations are today in conflict with those of the United States.” Public commentators likewise began to emphasize the threat Japan posed to the international system. Japan’s leaders, the New York Times remarked, had long stood with the international order, but in Manchuria Japan was “turning back the clock on her own progress,” and that even if she had a “good case” in Manchuria, she had justified it in such a “manner as to give offense to the moral judgment of the whole world.”

This growing sense that Japan was an existential and moral threat mandated a policy of containment in 1931, even if that policy undercut United States material interests. As Thorne argues, the United States might not have much at stake in the region, but the “new morality of international relations made it imperative” to contain the Japanese threat. Without some form of containment, the liberal international order would suffer irreparable damage. As Stimson argued, “If the fruits of aggression should be recognized the whole theory of the Kellogg Pact would be repudiated.” As Hornbeck’s “understanding of the cause and nature of the Manchurian crisis” shifted, he “repeatedly opposed restoration of the status quo ante
as the solution.”\textsuperscript{184} Indeed, in light of Japan’s attack on the global order, it seemed crucial that “the whole world be brought into line and into action in defense of rights and interests which are common to all in connection with the problems of peace.”\textsuperscript{185}

So convinced were officials of the existential and dire nature of the Japanese threat that they were willing to advocate for containment policies that flouted American strategic interests. Stimson and Hornbeck pressed for economic sanctions against Japan, even as these were perceived as undercutting financial interests.\textsuperscript{186} Hornbeck argued strenuously that “it was not necessary, and it would not serve a useful purpose—but the contrary—publicly to brand Japan a moral culprit and place her on exhibition as such before a world which is divided in opinion with regard to principles of morality.”\textsuperscript{187}

The United States had long preferred a stable China, yet now “Washington, in the interest of principle, preferred that China continue to fight” and that “China suffer . . . than recognize Japanese gains achieved in defiance of the Nine Power treaty.”\textsuperscript{188} And American resistance to accommodation must now stretch far beyond Asia. Allowing Japan to defy the treaties would mean, as a State Department memo outlined, “we would go back on our treaties.” United States concern for the peace structure, Hornbeck argued, “did not relate particularly to the Orient but to the entire world.”\textsuperscript{189}

In sum, in a period of months the United States went from seeing Japan as a reliable partner in the liberal order to viewing Japan’s expansion as an existential threat to the global system of governance. Japan’s actions in and of themselves cannot explain this shift: aggression against Manchuria could have been interpreted as a local and reasonable response to ongoing instability in China. It was Japan’s legitimation of its actions as a necessary step in introducing a new order, one which did not admit the legitimacy of existing treaties, that changed how the United States perceived Japan’s ambition and, as a result, the strategies necessary to deal with the rising power. Once Japan appeared as a power unconstrained by treaties, as attacking, not only China, but the world order, accommodation was impossible. Containment and confrontation were the only answers to Japan’s revisionist aims.

Interwar Japan has come to epitomize the revolutionary revisionist, a state whose rise no great power could accommodate. Captured by a military government, driven by ideological zeal, dependent on expansion for its wealth, security, and legitimacy, there was no way to bargain over Japan’s increasingly rapacious demands. In 1931, as Japan moved into Manchuria, containment was inevitable; ten years later, war would become unavoidable. It is understandable why we are tempted to tell the story of U.S.-Japanese relations as hinging on Japan’s type. For myriad reasons—the political instability that the Meiji restoration unleashed, its late economic development—Japan always seemed vulnerable to revolutionary forces. From this perspective, Manchuria is simply the moment that the United States fully
understood the extent of Japan’s aims, that it read, correctly, as the revolutionary’s true intentions. Yet, the chapter here has attempted to reveal serious silences in this conventional story.

First, why 1931? Why in 1931 would the United States come to see Japan as a revolutionary threat? As maintained throughout this chapter, there was nothing inherent in Japan’s invasion of Manchuria that was threatening to the U.S. position. That Japan would control Manchuria had been a given in U.S. policy toward the country since at least the turn of the century. Even as the crisis unfolded, voices within the U.S. government urged accommodation, arguing that Japan had and would continue to act as a source of order in China. What Manchuria came to mean—how it signaled revolutionary intent—is thus a serious puzzle for conventional explanations. As argued here, we cannot understand the meaning of Manchuria without a discussion of legitimation strategies: it was the justification of Japan’s leaders, their rhetorical challenge to the international order, which gave significance to the Manchurian signal.

A second implication goes beyond this. Rhetoric was not simply a revelation of Japan’s true type. True that there were renovationist, revolutionary forces in Japan clamoring for expansion, and true also that these voices would come to dominate Japan’s politics. But in 1931, interests were still very much in flux. There were, as discussed above, credible signals of restraint, whether it was Japan’s decision to pull back from Shanghai, in the government’s efforts to subdue the Kwantung Army, or the refusal to recognize the state of Manchukuo. As argued here, arguably these costly signals revealed the continued uncertainty of Japan’s type, the instability of its intentions, even as its language hardened.

Indeed, the case of Japan casts doubt on the literature’s fundamental distinction between “revolutionary” and “limited aims” revisionist states. What was it that was essentially revolutionary about Japan in 1931? Not the extent of its aims, which were still quite limited. Not the composition of its government, which remained in flux. Not its society, much of which remained disconnected from the events of Manchuria. What was revolutionary was the rhetoric itself. Indeed it was, arguably, this rhetorical turn that birthed a revolutionary Japan. It emboldened renovationists at home, empowering their position in politics. And abroad, it placed Japan outside the boundaries of the legitimate world order. Rhetoric was not a reflection of type; it was its creator, the engine of revolutionary change. This raises a fundamental question: if signals are shaping intentions—and not the other way around—then this opens up space for a social constructivist turn in studies of strategic interaction, one in which identities are constructed through the signaling process. We’ll turn to this question in the conclusion of this book.