

## Lessons from the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression for a More Stable and Peaceful International System

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### **Abstract**

*The Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945) offers enduring lessons for designing a more stable and peaceful international system. Through an expanded literature review and thematic analysis of historical and contemporary scholarship, this paper extracts principles regarding multilateral cooperation, national resilience, addressing root causes of conflict, the role of international institutions, memory politics, and post-conflict reconstruction. The analysis reveals convergent insights: durable peace requires institutions that combine representative legitimacy with enforcement capacity, domestic resilience that preserves civil liberties, economic policies that mitigate structural drivers of aggression, and deliberate reconciliation efforts. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for states, regional bodies, and multilateral organizations seeking to prevent aggression and manage effective reconstruction.*

**Keywords:** *Sino-Japanese War, collective security, international institutions, national resilience, memory politics, post-conflict reconstruction*

### **Introduction**

The Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945) is one of the central and most consequential episodes in modern East Asian and global history. As a prolonged conflict that overlapped and intertwined with the broader Second World War, it generated humanitarian catastrophe, disrupted regional political orders, and reshaped post-war institutional design. Scholarship on the war ranges from detailed military histories to studies of

civilian experience, diplomatic negotiations among the Allies, and the politics of memory in the subsequent decades (Ahn, 2023; Kulneva, 2023; Tian, 2022). Contemporary scholars and policy analysts increasingly treat the Sino-Japanese War as a source of practical lessons for designing mechanisms to prevent aggression, manage conflict, and organize reconstruction.

This paper synthesizes the multidisciplinary literature and focuses on extracting policy-relevant lessons for the contemporary international order. The first section conducts a comprehensive literature review, highlighting theoretical debates and recent empirical work. The second provides a concise historical overview of the conflict and international responses during the wartime period. The third section extracts analytical lessons across five domains: multilateral cooperation and collective security; national unity and resilience; addressing root causes of aggression; the role of international institutions and post-war reconstruction; and memory and reconciliation. The final section offers concrete recommendations for contemporary policymakers and multilateral institutions. Throughout, emphasis is placed on linking historical insights to present-day institutional and policy design.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Frameworks on War, Peace, and the Design of International Order**

Classical and contemporary international-relations theories provide competing but complementary lenses for interpreting the Sino-Japanese War and for deriving prescriptive lessons. Realist perspectives underline power distributions, security dilemmas, and the incentives for territorial expansion; explanations of Japanese militarism often foreground structural imperatives tied to resource security and strategic positioning (Ahn, 2023). Liberal institutionalists, by contrast, emphasize the role of multilateral institutions, international law, and economic interdependence as stabilizing influences that can mitigate the recurrence of interstate violence. The interwar period's institutional failures, especially the impotence of the League of Nations, feature prominently in literature arguing for stronger, more enforceable institutions in the post-war era (Perminova, 2021). Constructivist scholarship adds a cultural and ideational dimension, focusing on identity, narratives, and the politics of memory that shape state behaviour across generations (Gustafsson, 2020; Kulneva, 2023).

Synthesizing these approaches, scholars studying the Sino-Japanese War typically argue for an integrated view: material motives, institutional weaknesses, and ideational constructions were mutually constitutive in producing conditions for aggression and in shaping resistance and reconstruction strategies (Ahn, 2023). This integrative perspective undergirds the analytic orientation of this paper: lessons for the contemporary system must attend to power distribution, institutional design, economic governance, and the politics of memory.

### **Historiographical debates and empirical studies on the war**

The historical literature on the Sino-Japanese War is rich and heterogeneous. Military historians detail the campaigns, logistics, and strategic decisions (Ahn, 2023), while social historians examine civilian suffering, displacement, and wartime livelihoods. More recent scholarship has focused on the contestation of wartime narratives and the uses of memory by political actors (Kulneva, 2023; Perminova, 2021). and Kazantsev (2022) analyze how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang (KMT) shaped images of the aggressor and framed resistance as

foundational to political legitimacy. These works underscore how domestic politics and memory formation influenced both wartime mobilization and post-war political settlements.

### **Memory studies and reconciliation dynamics**

A substantial subfield is devoted to memory politics and its influence on contemporary relations, particularly Sino-Japanese relations. Gustafsson (2020, 2021) and Yarlykova (2022) highlight the persistence of unresolved grievances, the contested commemoration of events such as the Nanjing Massacre, and the ways these memories are institutionalized in museums, school curricula, and public rituals. Kulneva (2025) shows that media representations and competing national narratives can perpetuate mutual suspicion and complicate diplomatic normalization. This body of work argues that memory management must be an explicit component of any long-term peace strategy: institutional reparations and memorial initiatives can facilitate reconciliation if they follow principles of truth, acknowledgment, and shared historical dialogue.

### **Wartime planning and the architecture of post-war institutions**

Wartime planners were explicitly engaged in designing a post-war architecture that would prevent recurrence of aggressive expansion. Contemporaneous documents reveal wartime debates on the foundations of collective security, the institutionalization of public health arrangements, and post-war economic stabilization. The creation of the United Nations, specialized agencies, and international conferences on agriculture and public welfare were intended to address the governance deficits that had characterized the interwar period. The literature on institutional design stresses that legitimacy, through inclusion and equitable representation, combined with enforcement mechanisms, are prerequisites for durable multilateral governance.

### **National resilience, civilian mobilization, and cultural production**

Research on domestic mobilization during the Sino-Japanese War emphasizes the role of political coalition-building, cultural production, and educational institutions in sustaining resistance. Zhang (2022) analyses the CCP's political mobilization, while Liu (2025) and Wang (2025) document the role of educational institutions and intellectual communities in producing civic resilience. Deng and Tahir (2024) analyze the function of printmaking and visual art in shaping public sentiment and mobilizing resistance. This literature suggests that societal resilience is not merely a function of material capacity but is buttressed by civic structures, cultural articulation of purpose, and the protection of social institutions capable of operating under stress.

### **Economic drivers and the need for structural remedies**

The war's origins and the interwar period reveal the salience of economic drivers in precipitating militarism. Contemporaneous commentators recognized that inequitable distribution of commodities, trade disruptions, and competition for strategic resources contributed to the logic of conquest. Tang et al. (2025) and later economic historians connect wartime economic dislocations to long-term developmental trajectories, suggesting that post-conflict economic policy and international cooperation on food and resource distribution are essential for preventing the reemergence of conflict. The literature converges on the point that genuine peace requires attention to structural economic inequalities and effective global cooperation on resource governance.

## **Synthesis of literature and identified research gaps**

Across these literatures, several convergent themes emerge: institutions matter (but must be legitimate and capable), domestic resilience is essential (but must protect civil liberties), economic justice is a peacebuilding imperative, and memory politics can be a source of continuing instability unless deliberately managed. Nevertheless, research gaps remain, particularly in comparative, quantitative assessments of how specific institutional designs influence reconciliation outcomes, and in interdisciplinary studies linking memory work to measurable policy instruments for reconciliation. Addressing these gaps would strengthen the practical applicability of lessons derived from the Sino-Japanese War to contemporary institutional reforms.

## **Historical Overview of the Conflict and International Responses**

The escalation of hostilities in the 1930s, culminating in the full-scale outbreak in 1937, saw Japanese forces conduct extensive military campaigns across eastern and central China. The hostilities produced large-scale civilian casualties, widespread displacement, epidemics, and infrastructural devastation that debilitated public health and social services. Refugee flows affected neighbouring territories, with significant public-health implications that attracted international attention (Kulneva, 2025).

Early international responses were fragmented. While there were condemnations and some economic measures, a coherent, immediate counterforce to Japanese aggression did not materialize until the broader Allied coalition formed in the context of global war. Wartime institutions such as the Supreme War Council and a series of inter-Allied conferences were instrumental in passing from ad hoc responses to coordinated strategy. These wartime forums also undertook forward-looking planning for a post-war institutional order designed to prevent lapses that had characterized the interwar period.

## **Analytical Lessons for a More Stable and Peaceful International System**

### **Lesson 1: Multilateral cooperation and credible collective security**

The Sino-Japanese War shows that unilateral or poorly coordinated diplomacy is insufficient to deter expansionist powers. The emergence of Allied unity during World War II demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated strategy for military containment and defeat of aggressors. However, the post-war challenge is to institutionalize such cooperation in peacetime. Contemporary global governance should prioritize institutions that combine inclusive representation with credible enforcement, mechanisms capable of both preventive diplomacy and decisive action when deterrence fails. Reformed multilateral institutions should feature clear decision-making pathways, rapid-response capacities, and integrated civil-military tools for crisis stabilization (Perminova, 2021).

### **Lesson 2: National unity and resilient institutions that preserve civil liberties**

China's protracted resistance underlined the centrality of domestic cohesion in contesting aggression (Zhang, 2022; Liu, 2025). Political coalition-building, civic engagement, and cultural mobilization played complementary roles to military resistance. Yet wartime conditions also risked erosions of civil liberties. Thus, states must cultivate resilience through institutions that enable inclusive mobilization while preserving rights: transparent civil-military relations,

effective legislative oversight, and robust judicial protections diminish the risk that temporary emergency measures become permanent encroachments on liberty (Wang, 2025).

### **Lesson 3: Address root causes, imperialism, resource competition, and economic injustice**

Japanese expansionism had structural economic and ideological roots. Scholars emphasize that addressing such root causes requires international cooperation on economic governance, equitable access to resources, and mechanisms to reduce incentives for conquest. Contemporary policy must integrate development and security: poverty, resource scarcity, and exclusionary economic systems can be addressed through cooperative trade regimes, resource-sharing accords, and technology transfer that reduce zero-sum incentives.

### **Lesson 4: Institutional design for reconstruction and long-term stability**

Post-war architects sought mechanisms for reconstruction and prevention, ranging from the UN to specialized agencies and coordinated food and agricultural planning. Effective institutions require legitimacy, resources, and implementation capacity. Contemporary reforms should focus on coupling security mandates with development instruments, ensuring that reconstruction financing is responsive, accountable, and anchored in local ownership.

### **Lesson 5: Memory, reconciliation, and long-term diplomacy**

The politics of memory, how societies commemorate and narrate wartime experience, has enduring effects on interstate relations. Unresolved grievances and memorial politics have complicated Sino-Japanese rapprochement (Gustafsson, 2020; Yarlykova, 2022). Effective reconciliation requires truth-telling, acknowledgement of victims, educational initiatives that reflect multiple perspectives, and civil-society engagement. International actors can facilitate transnational memory work that supports reconciliation rather than perpetuating grievance.

## **Post-war Reconstruction: Economic Policies, Civil Liberties, and Institutional Realignment**

Contemporary reconstruction efforts can learn from past mistakes and successes. Wartime planners recognized the need for coherent fiscal policy, careful monetary management, and structural reforms to prevent immediate post-conflict economic dislocation. Equally important is protecting civil liberties during transition: reintegrating displaced populations, restoring public services, and reforming security institutions must proceed under transparent oversight to prevent the consolidation of repressive structures adopted during emergencies.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Reform and strengthen multilateral institutions: Update governance structures to reflect contemporary power distributions while preserving inclusivity. Build rapid preventive diplomacy and response capacities, with clear mandates linking diplomatic, economic, and collective-security tools.

Integrate development and security: Embed development objectives into security frameworks, ensuring post-conflict reconstruction financing addresses both infrastructure and social equity. Invest in mechanisms for resource-sharing and equitable trade that reduce incentives for expansion.

Promote resilient, rights-respecting domestic institutions: Encourage frameworks that enable inclusive national mobilization while protecting civil liberties and ensuring legislative oversight of security measures.

Prioritize memory and reconciliation: Support truth commissions, victim recognition programs, cooperative educational exchanges, and civil-society dialogues to address historical grievances.

Strengthen reconstruction financing and coordination: Design financing instruments that are rapid, accountable, and locally anchored; coordinate through multilateral platforms that integrate security and development.

## Conclusion

The Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression offers a rich repository of lessons for contemporary institutional design and statecraft. The conflict underscores the necessity of multi-layered responses, robust and legitimate international institutions for collective security; resilient domestic institutions that mobilize without eroding democratic rights; integrated economic policies that tackle structural drivers of conflict; and deliberate reconciliation mechanisms that manage the politics of memory. Translating historic lessons into contemporary practice requires both political will and institutional innovation. Contemporary policymakers must build organizations that are representative, enforceable, and developmentally oriented; support national institutions that protect both security and rights; and invest in reconciliation processes that address past harms while stabilizing future relations. Doing so will advance the enduring objective that wartime planners set in the mid-20th century: a world order capable of preventing aggression, managing conflict, and enabling a durable peace.

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