An Open Letter from Viscount Cecil on Force behind the Law

League of Nations Union
15 Grosvenor Crescent, S.W.1
My dear—

I am much obliged for your letter, and note your doubts and difficulties about the Covenant and the League of Nations.

I assume that we are both agreed that our object is to promote peace, not only in this country and the Empire, but generally. Indeed, taking the geographical situation of the Empire and its interests into consideration, it is extremely doubtful whether it is possible to secure peace for ourselves unless peace is also secured for most parts if not for the whole of the world. Once war begins, no one can tell how far it will spread. A quarrel about a political assassination in the south-east corner of Europe in 1914 involved almost every civilised country in War. Even those who kept out of the actual fighting suffered severely. The essential thing, then, is to maintain peace. How can that be done?

PACIFISM

There are some who urge that we should abolish all armaments and refuse to fight on any pretext. If this view is put forward on religious grounds, I will not deal with it beyond saying that it does not seem to me to be in accordance with the Bible, and that is the opinion of the great majority of those who have studied the subject. If, on the other hand, its advocates believe that it would make for peace, it is inconsistent with recent events. China made little or no resistance to Japan, yet that did not save her from the loss of territories as large as half Europe, and the slaughter of some thousands of her citizens. The more we know of the resistance of Abyssinia to Italy, the less important it turns out to have been. And both China and especially Abyssinia repeatedly offered to their invaders to abide by the decision of arbitrators or the International Court as to the justice
of their quarrels. There really is no ground for thinking that pure pacifism would save the British Empire from spoliation or the World from War.

I know it is said that if all obligations to use force or at least military force were dropped from the Covenant, Japan, Germany and America would join the League and the moral force of such a universal body would restrain the most determined aggressor. I wish I could think so. Japan ignored the unanimous condemnation of her occupation of Manchuria by the whole League Assembly, which then included both Germany and Italy—a condemnation in which it was well known that America fully concurred. Similarly, America and Japan both showed that they agreed in the League’s denunciation of the Abyssinian adventure, without affecting the action of Italy. Nor do I believe that the abandonment of sanctions would bring back to the League Germany or Japan, or induce America to join it. On the contrary, in the case of Germany and the United States there is good reason to believe that they have never been more disposed to accept the League than when it appeared in the early autumn of 1935 that the Council were prepared to coerce Italy into peace. The truth is that it is not sanctions to which these countries object, but any interference with national sovereignty by international action. Indeed, if there is to be such interference, they respect it more if it is effective. It could not have been sanctions that made Germany withdraw from the International Labour Office as well as from the League. In Japan it is said that any Ministry that even makes a treaty with a foreign power becomes unpopular. The same is true in a degree of the United States. And most Americans would be repelled rather than attracted if, to use their own expression, the League ceased to have any “teeth”.

REGIONAL PACTS

Assuming, then, that it is agreed that mere remonstrance, however formally and influentially uttered, will
not stop an aggressive nation from invading another, we come to another class of critics who say that only economic sanctions should be enforced generally against all aggressors, military sanctions being kept, in each case, to the discretion of the members of the League. Most people who take this view go on to say that this system should be reinforced by special agreements—regional pacts—by which the parties would undertake to take military action against aggressors in particular regions. Thus we and the French and Germans and Belgians might be specially bound to take military measures against any of the named nations which attacked another; whereas we should only be bound to take economic action against an aggressor elsewhere, though we might also take military measures if we chose. I do not think that this is in accordance with the terms of the Covenant.

But apart from all technical difficulties, is the plan a good one? The theory on which it rests is that we have a special and vital interest in preserving the status quo in the region indicated. Our frontier, it is said, is on the Rhine. I wonder why? In itself, does it much matter to us whether the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine belong to France or to Germany? or exactly where the frontier between Germany and Belgium should be drawn? I do not think so. What does matter is that any change of these frontiers by force would involve war. Peace is our interest. It might make it a little worse if the war broke out in that district, but not much; for I have already pointed out that though the Great War began in the south-east corner of Europe, yet we were almost immediately involved. Why? Because Europe is nowadays one whole. Any serious disturbance in Europe endangers the peace of the whole Continent. Even the civil war in Spain—a matter which in old days might have been treated as a purely internal affair—has brought about serious international complications. We have been told by our Government that it has been striving to prevent the Spanish rebellion developing into a European war—which means that, in their judgment, that was a grave
danger—as no doubt it was. The same thing is true of Central Europe. There have been many rumours that Germany contemplates an attack on Czechoslovakia, and there are people in this country who say that such an event would not concern us. They are certainly wrong. Neither France nor Russia could allow Czechoslovakia to perish, and if France were involved, we should be forced to go in, too, or else see the possibility of a triumphant Germany dominating Europe. It would be just the same thing if, as Germany fears, Russia were to attack her. Indeed, most people would consider a Russian triumph as even worse than a German one. I repeat once more—our interest is not in this territorial arrangement or that. Our interest is peace. I do not myself, therefore, see how regional pacts affecting only a portion of Europe can meet the case. They will not suffice to keep the peace generally in Europe, and if they do not do that our danger will remain. I do not forget that under the scheme we are now considering we should still be bound to join in imposing economic sanctions on the aggressor. But would the fear of those be sufficient to prevent the outbreak of war? In some cases it might, but not in all. For if an aggressor thought that by a sudden blow he could conquer his victim, fear of sanctions would not deter him. Indeed, it is obvious that in the opinion of the advocates of this plan, economic pressure alone cannot be relied on to prevent war or they would not be ready to undertake to use military sanctions also in those regions where they regard peace as of vital interest to us. So that in the end the question comes to be—what is our vital interest? Is it in the preservation of peace generally—at any rate in Europe—or is it in the preservation of peace in certain localities? I cannot doubt that, for the reasons I have given, the prevention of any important European war is our vital interest. Obviously, if the League is to prevent such a war, the sooner it acts the better—if possible before war has actually broken out. Prevention, in this case, is infinitely better than cure.
PREVENTION

I would urge, therefore, that as soon as war definitely threatens, the Council of the League should meet to consider the position. If the members, excluding the parties to the dispute, believe that a menace of war exists, they should immediately take precautions, such as requiring the withdrawal of troops, the abandonment of preparations for war, the submission of the dispute to arbitration, etc. If either party refuses to comply, the Council should then consider what form of pressure should be applied to the recalcitrant Power. A scheme should be forthwith drawn up to prevent war, if possible, and—if not—to stop it, and the members of the League should be asked whether they are willing to carry it out. If a sufficient number are willing to carry it out, then a clear and definite agreement should be made that they will all take the necessary measures and see the thing through. By a sufficient number, I mean one providing force enough to make the coercion of the aggressive Power as nearly certain of success as is humanly possible. That is all that the Covenant or common sense requires. The object is to prevent war; and that can only be done if the peace-keepers have sufficient strength. On the other hand, there is nothing to sustain the contention that is sometimes put forward that, because the League is not universal no League action is possible. That would mean that if Haiti or Luxembourg withheld their support, nothing could be done. Universality of strength is not necessary but sufficiency is. As far as I can see, the Powers that remain active and loyal members of the League have at their disposal ample force to prevent or suppress any breach of the peace that can be foreseen.

DANGER OF AMBIGUITY

One other point on this matter should be borne in mind. Whatever policy is thought desirable, no ambiguity should be left as to what that policy is. If we mean
to act up fully to our obligations under the Covenant to repress aggression, including the use of military measures if they be needed, we should make that abundantly clear, particularly to any Power of aggressive tendencies. To leave the matter doubtful or indefinite is the way to bring about war. Had Lord Haldane succeeded in convincing Germany in 1912 that if she were to attack France we should go to the assistance of that country, it is at least doubtful whether war would have taken place two years later. Unfortunately, it was believed that our then Cabinet was divided, and other circumstances existed which encouraged those who desired war to hope we should do no more than protest. I believe that in most recent wars similar misconception have lured the aggressor on till retreat was impossible. Do not, then, let us be frightened by the talk of the danger of "commitments" from making it quite clear where we stand. The danger of uncertainty is far greater. *Obsta principiis* is a good legal maxim.

ARMAMENTS

Next, as to armaments. Almost everyone who has given serious thought to this question believes that international agreement for the limitation and, if possible, the reduction of armaments is essential for peace. As long as the nations insist on piling up armaments against one another, no machinery for keeping the peace can be fully trusted. Do not misunderstand me. I personally accept the contention that if the other nations of Europe insist on increasing their armaments, we must follow suit—if for no other reason, because we must be strong enough to do our part in securing world peace which can only be done by convincing would-be aggressors that aggression does not pay. But all the same, armaments will not by themselves secure peace. No one has put this point more strongly than Mr. Baldwin when he said last autumn at the Guildhall:
“... The whole of Europe is arming. Could there be a more inconceivable folly for those of us who have the responsibility of governing the great countries of Europe? What good can come of it? In so far as we devote the time to making arms, to that extent we delay the time when we can improve the conditions of the standard of life of our people. ... Indeed, if those armaments continue, I do not say they mean war, but they make war more likely.”

Armaments are an undoubted evil. They waste money and effort. Carried to a certain point, they threaten liberty. They breed suspicion between neighbouring States—suspicion which is the progenitor of war. But they seem to me a necessary evil unless all countries will agree to do without them. I do not see how this country can safely or properly be the only unarmed State in an armed world. But it is unquestionably our duty and our interest to do our utmost to induce all nations to agree to limit and reduce their armaments by international agreement.

There are many who think that the international limitation of armaments is the dream of unpractical visionaries. I do not agree. I believe it very nearly came off in 1932. The main thing that then stopped it was the fear of the French and of the British Government also, that if peaceful States reduced their armaments they might find themselves at the mercy of unscrupulous militarist Governments who would secretly remain armed to the teeth. If States are to be persuaded to reduce or limit their armaments, they must feel sure that they will be protected against aggression. Under the League plan they have that assurance. But if guarantees of military help are cut down to certain districts by regional pacts, the guarantee becomes valueless. If France can still be attacked through her friends in Central Europe, she will not feel it safe to disarm merely because she is guaranteed against direct attack on her eastern frontier. Again, unless Germany is guaranteed against attack from the east she must remain fully armed, and if she is fully armed France must be the same.
EUROPE ONE WHOLE

It all comes back to this. Europe under modern conditions has become one whole, and if peace is to be preserved in the west it must also be preserved in the east of that Continent. That is the obligation of the Covenant. What actual steps may be necessary for that purpose cannot be foreseen till the danger occurs. But whatever is needed should be then settled upon and carried out in the way I have described.

FAR EAST AND ABYSSINIA

It may be urged that this plan may sound very well but it is impracticable, as the events in the Far East and Abyssinia have shown. Far be it from me to underrate the disastrous consequences of the success of Japanese and Italian aggression. It has shaken grievously the world confidence in the League which, up to the autumn of 1931, was steadily increasing. But there are some mitigating circumstances which should not be forgotten. Undoubtedly the Manchurian question was very difficult for the League to handle. Two of the Great Powers, Russia and the United States, most interested in the Far East, without whose help vigorous action was impossible, were neither of them then members of the League. A third, the United Kingdom, was in the throes of a grave financial crisis. Even so, the unanimous verdict against Japan of that very authoritative international tribunal—the Lytton Commission, approved without dissent by the League Assembly—though it failed to stop the Japanese militarists, has helped to discredit their policy, both in their own country and in World opinion. Sooner or later they will have to retrace their steps. In Abyssinia the case was different. The members of the League Council had ample power to stop the Italian invasion, but they had not the courage to use it. It is unhappily too true that neither the British nor the French Government realised that what was at stake was

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not merely the independence of Abyssinia but the principle of international co-operation for peace. Still, it was some compensation to find that the machinery of sanctions worked quite well. The overwhelming majority of the members of the League showed they were ready to take joint action against an aggressor, which came near success and, with a little more resolution, might have been turned into an international triumph. If that lesson is taken to heart we may hope that the next international crime will be effectually stopped. It certainly will if, in the interval, world opinion is properly educated and organised. That is why the increasing success of the International Peace Campaign in Europe is so encouraging.

**LEAGUE OR WAR**

The relative failures in the Far East and Abyssinia are, then, no justification for defeatism. After all, it is not reasonable to expect that the extirpation of such an ancient iniquity as war would be accomplished at the first attempt. Rather should we be thankful that we have made so much progress. We have established at Geneva an international organisation for peace by co-operation. It has prevented a number of minor quarrels from degenerating into war. It has promoted a very large number of commercial, humanitarian and cultural reforms. It has provided a meeting place for the representatives of the nations. It has shown that in principle they are ready to co-operate for peace; and it has created a Permanent Court of International Justice which has enjoyed unbroken success. These are great achievements, and promise greater. For the League has a duty not only to prevent and stop war, but to remove its causes. The treaties of Paris caused as much bitterness as the treaties at the end of a war always have done. Some of the grievances so caused are reasonable; others are not. But the League, and we who support it, must be ready to examine all complaints by any of its members and, where justice requires it, remedies must be recommended.
That, then, is the League system, "to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security." It may fail, and then I suppose we shall return to the pre-war condition of international relations, softened, it may be, by some well-meant but futile salutations of the League Idea. That means war, and war on a scale far more destructive than anything we have known. It may well be, as sober statesmen tell us, the end of our civilisation. But the League need not fail. The forces of bureaucracy and reaction are strong, but they are not so strong as the Will of the Peoples of the World, and there can be no doubt that the Peoples' Will is for Peace.

Yours etc.,

CECIL.