

DIPLOMACY IN EAST ASIA: AN EXPRESSION OF GENERAL WORLD VIEWS

by

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Diplomacy always reflects underlying philosophical concepts of different theories of government and of international relations. In order to understand the diplomatic history of East Asia, one must understand the prevailing world views of the major powers involved. It seems to me that in the modern period, say 1600 to the present, it is possible to discern a number of perceptions which are responsible for the shaping of the history of East Asia.

The oldest of these is the world view embodied in the traditional Confucian system of international relations as practiced by the Chinese. This diplomacy of cultural imperialism was expressed in the Chinese tributary system. Its fundamental premise was that of an ethnocentric Chinese view of the world, in which China was indeed the sole source of civilization and culture, a view which currently corresponded to historical reality for all of the many centuries from the Ch'in unification to the Manchu dynasty. In this view, China was perceived to exercise a civilizing mission for a vast segment of the world on the basis of her actual power and cultural splendor. That same ethnocentric view was again put forward today, when the leadership of the People's Republic advanced its claim that only the Maoist example of revolution, based on the peasant masses, can bring about the ultimate victory of Socialism in all the underdeveloped areas of the world, be they in Asia, Africa or Latin America. ¹

China's traditional diplomacy of cultural imperialism, reflecting the ideas of Confucius and his great disciples, expressed a view of the world based upon the concept of a pre-ordained natural order in which all things were arranged in a hierarchical fashion. Confucius himself had stated that all society was governed by the classic five fundamental relationships between superior and inferior, namely those between a man and his wife, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, friend and friend, and sovereign and minister. All of these rested upon the key notion of inequality, which was an inherent fact of nature, and indeed was a necessary one lest society would be plunged into disorder and confusion. The maintenance of such inequality, and hence of order and stability, depended upon following the rules of proper procedure or etiquette, *li*. Since there existed only one world order, there logically could exist only one world empire; and since the central portion of the globe was occupied by China — the Middle Kingdom — all men beyond its bounds were considered to be more or less barbarian, lacking culture by not understanding the rules of *li* or proper conduct. If men wanted to be civilized, it was assumed that they would naturally abide by the rules of proper conduct, causing them to emulate the Chinese and to be influenced by Chinese civilization.

The central assumption of Chinese cultural imperialism was then the belief that China was the center of the universe, the fountainhead of all virtue and the possessor of all culture to which inferior nations would look naturally for inspiration and civilization through the adaptation of Chinese ideas and institutions. Chinese influence, one would argue, would flow naturally from the core outward to the barbarian fringes, and China would control the world not by a series of wars of conquest but by the example of her superiority. These basic philosophic assumptions eventually were translated into a diplomatic system, that of the tributary missions. In this system, the payment of tribute by an inferior nation to the Son of Heaven was a ritual performance, in return for which the Chinese government bestowed a series of privileges and boons upon the inferior. Symbolically, this was expressed most importantly by the inferior nation's acceptance of the Chinese calendar and a seal of investiture. In addition, the tributary system also included a very effective carrot, an economic incentive, a form of hidden trade, whereby the Chinese returned presents, after the tribute had been paid, whose value far exceeded that of the tribute offered.

In periods of great Chinese strength, the Manchu empire of the seventeenth century for example, the tributary system embraced a very wide area of the East Asian world, including Korea, the Li-ch'iu islands, Annam, Laos, Siam, Burma and portions of Northwest Asia. When the system was working well, it gave China peace and security along her borders, providing a system of national defense.

This Confucian world view came to be pitted eventually against the views of the European maritime trading powers, whose interests were in trade and the spread of their national power, especially that of Great Britain who clearly occupied a position of preeminence. Before the English, there had been Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch sea barbarians, but it was the Anglo-Chinese confrontation in

the 19th century which best illustrated the clash of two fundamentally opposed world views.

British considerations for her overseas trade and markets were augmented, after Waterloo, by her government's insistence on being recognized for what she was, the greatest global power of the century, and the very embodiment of the newly risen forces of the Industrial Revolution. The resultant clash between the Chinese and the English, with their two totally different perceptions of the world, ushered in a period of revolution for the Chinese which has lasted until the very recent past. The result was the complete collapse of the old order, and a period of chaos and anarchy eventually terminating in the victory of Chinese communism. The history of this conflict is part of the well known story of the Canton system, the ensuing Anglo-Chinese wars (the "opium war", so-called, and the "Arrow" war), and the imposition of unequal treaties by the victorious Western powers, Britain always in the lead, upon the unfortunate Chinese.

It is important to remember that, until the very last decade of the 19th century, the European policies toward China remained satisfied with China's acknowledgement of Western superiority and, above all, with the right, proclaimed divine by Manchester liberals, to trade freely everywhere. In other words, within the concept of a diplomacy of trade and national power, there were no attempts at territorial acquisition by any of the major nations, excepting areas at the fringes of the Chinese empire which had formerly belonged to the Chinese tributary system such as Burma. Until 1895, all powers operated under the diplomatic assumptions characterized by the slogan: "to trade, but not to govern."²

The year China suffered a most degrading defeat by Japan, 1895, marked the beginning of a totally new era, that of the diplomacy of imperialism.

Imperialism may be defined as a system of political and economic control by which one state imposes its will upon another, a process which may lead to the establishment of a protectorate, and, eventually, to the dismemberment of the victim. As there are many forms of imperialism, so too, there have been many theories explaining it. Certainly one of the foremost of these is the Marxist theory of imperialism, propounded by no less a figure than Lenin himself, and such Marxist scholars as Hobson. Here, it is argued that imperialism is the necessary last stage of capitalism searching for overseas markets for its products and abundant supplies of cheap labor. Critics of the Marxist approach must include Schumpeter, in his brilliant study "Marxism, Socialism and Democracy."

Another approach to imperialism might be called the bourgeois-liberal one. Here, the phenomenon is seen as primarily a political one, a question of power, prestige and, sometimes, of a civilizing mission. The imperialism of Great Britain under Disraeli, or the French missionary impulse in North Africa and Indochina would fall into this category. Kipling, proclaiming the white man's burden and talking about the lesser breeds before the law, remains as the great popularizer of

such sentiments. Social Darwinism, too, many have been an important influence in the shaping of Imperialism.

Some recent writers have declared imperialism to be some form of social atavism, or yet again, have looked upon it as a necessary safety valve for domestic politics. Bismarck's actions, for example, have served to illustrate the thesis that he chose imperialist policies as a way which would release social and psychological pressures in Germany's domestic situation.³

Be that as it may, in East Asia, imperialism and its diplomacy threatened to do to China after 1895 what had been done to Africa in the preceding decades, that is to create a map resembling a crazy quiltwork pattern in which varying color denoted areas of different foreign domination. In the "scramble for concessions," or the "cutting of the Chinese melon," imperialist thinking of such diversified powers as the Germans, the Russians, the British, the French, the Japanese and, eventually, the Italians, dominated all diplomatic moves in East Asia.

One good example, among many, may serve to illustrate this point. It deals with the German interest in China, which eventually produced the Triple Intervention against Japan in April, 1895. As I have shown elsewhere,⁴ it was originally believed that the prime mover in the Triplíce was the Russian state, but, in fact, it was the German desire to obtain for herself an Asiatic base for her Far Eastern squadron which led to this development. Germany had attempted to mediate between China and Japan during the course of the hostilities, with the aim of getting a reward for her services; and, after surveying a series of alternative courses, the German government had concluded that if it were to act on behalf of China, it stood a better chance of being rewarded with the long sought after naval base. When Japan refused to consider German mediation, the Germans intervened over the Liaotung issue, suggesting to the Russian government a diplomatic intervention which the latter was only too happy to support, given its interest in Southern Manchuria with its warm water ports. The French joined in the Triplíce as the result of the Franco-Russian alliance, illustrating, thereby, how great power politics on a global scale had now come to permeate East Asian affairs. The Triple Intervention, thus, serves as a fine example of the diplomacy of imperialism, by which China eventually became the real loser, and by which Japanese thinking, in the new ideology of Nipponism, was influenced in its belief that the only thing that really mattered was a powerful armed establishment serving the needs of militant expansionism.

The diplomacy of imperialism may be said to have been the basic framework on which diplomatic events took place from the days of the Triple Intervention to World War I; but, then, new ideologies began to emerge, first in China and later in Japan, which provided a new outlook on international affairs and shaped a different world. These were the ideologies of nationalism, first observed in China at the time of the Versailles settlement.

To define nationalism is in itself not an easy task. Carleton Hayes in his

"Essays on Nationalism" defined it as an intellectual development, an ideological fact, a condition of the mind. Nationalism, having roots which go back to the European middle ages, is, however, essentially a modern phenomenon and term, a by-product of the French revolution. The concept of a French nation, powerfully stimulated by the *levee' en masse*, and Napoleon's European warfare with its reaction by other European nations against French control, are the immediate ancestors of modern nationalism. The concept is based upon the idea of nationality, wherein there exists a group of people sharing a common language, history and culture, and nationalism may be defined as the process by which these nationalities are established as political units, together with the intensification of their consciousness of nationality and the rise of the political philosophy of the national state. Or, to use a somewhat different terminology, nationalism is a condition of the mind among members of a nationality in which loyalty to the ideal or fact of the national state is superior to all other loyalties, together with pride and belief in its intrinsic excellence and mission.

Nationalism, then, is different from Imperialism, which had been the philosophy characterizing the conduct of diplomacy in East Asia before 1918. Nationalism believes that each nation must constitute a united, independent and sovereign state, and that it expects and requires of its citizens unquestioned obedience and supreme loyalty. Finally, there is in nationalism also the idea of an unmistakable faith in each nation's surpassing excellence over all other nationalities and pride in its unique destiny. Unlike the traditional Confucian world empire, it poses a doctrine at once more narrow and more intense. Its ingredients include geographical unity, racial unity, separate language, religion and tradition and contact with the past.

China's successful nationalist revolution, based upon the principles of Sun Yat-sen and his Kuomintang, soon produced a nationalist form of diplomacy, the "rights recovery" movement, which was directed against foreign Imperialism, whether British, French, Russian or Japanese. Demanding and obtaining, for the greater part, the abolition of the unequal treaties, it also led to clashes in Manchuria and, thus, to a collision course with the nationalism of Japan, and, sharper yet, the ultranationalist conception of the Japanese extremists in the armed forces which culminated, after a series of previous incidents such as the one at Tsinan, the blowing up of Marshall Chiang Tso-lin, and the Nakamura case, in the famous Mukden incident of September 1931.

In Manchuria, the Chinese nationalist diplomacy, which had begun to make moves such as the building of new ports (Hulutao) or the construction of new railroad lines in competition with the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian railroad, squarely came up against the most virulent form of nationalist diplomacy, that of ultranationalism.

This movement, ultranationalism, combined the concept of a militant, aggressive nationalism abroad with program of a radical Social Revolution at home. Its

ideological proponents were writers such as Kita Ikki, Okawa Shumei and Gondo. Its most fervent disciples came from the ranks of the "young officers" in the Japanese military. It was these military extremists who engineered the Manchurian incident, who kept up unrelenting pressure – politically, economically and territorially – against the Chinese Nationalist government in north China and who incited the Marco Polo incident of July 1937 and the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war, a wearisome and unprofitable struggle.

Japan's inability to settle the China incident (since she was never free to launch all her manpower and resources against the Chungking government because of the formidable shadow of renewed Soviet power to the North) also led the Japanese government into a series of major diplomatic blunders. Matsuoka, then Japan's Foreign Minister, and no enemy to ultranationalism since he himself was the product of the Japanese regime within Manchukuo, led Japan in her opposition to the West. He initiated the conclusion of the Tripartite pact of 1940, a pact which had grown out of some earlier agreements with the Axis (the Anti-comintern pact of 1936 f.i.); thus, aligning Japan with Germany and Italy.

Japan's attempt to convey Hitlerite Germany and Fascist Italy into ideologically suitable partners merely demonstrated the egocentricity of the aims which bound the three nations together. To serve their own interests, the Germans for instance, were quite willing to ignore Japan's animosity to the Soviet Union and to enter into a truce with the latter. So much so that when Nazi Germany, by 1938 and 1939, changed its policies to face the West and to settle the Polish problem, a change which resulted in the German-Russian non-aggression pact, Japan was never informed. The Japanese, likewise, were quite willing to sacrifice important German interests in China which conflicted with Japan's aim to totally dominate China. When Germany in 1940, pressed Japan to take the initiative against Britain by attacking Singapore, and recommended, in 1941, an attack against the Soviets in the Far East, the Japanese demurred. However, the worst mistake of Matsuoka's policy, that of ultranationalism, was the failure of the Tripartite Pact to deter the United States in its growing opposition to Japan's continental expansion. As a result of her alliance to the Axis powers, Japan merely alienated American opinion, in Congress, the press and the public, which, in turn, led to America's unyielding insistence, in the fall of the 1941 Hull-Konoye negotiations, that Japan would have to abandon all of her ill-gotten gains in China before the American economic embargo (July 1941) could be lifted.

In like manner, the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression pact of April 1941, ultimately led to disaster for Japan and ultranationalism. It gave Stalin the badly needed freedom of facing the German onslaught with a secure rear. However, it did not deny the Soviet Union the opportunity, of which she made free use in August, 1945, of attacking Japan when she was ready to do so. Ultrnationalism had then resulted in a diplomacy leading to the fatal decision by Japan to enter World War II, a direct consequence to the use of the first atomic weapons, and to her crashing defeat.

The end of the second World War in East Asia reduced Japan to a state of helplessness, and China to a nation torn by civil war, and beset by economic chaos. Ironically, nowhere else on the globe had the polarization of power become more obvious than in East Asia, with the emergence of two superpowers, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., after 1945. At the Yalta conference, early that year, a clear attempt was made to maintain a balance of power between these two, in which a newly defined role assigned Russia control over Manchuria (a fact of life which could not have been prevented by the Allies in any case,) and the United States the undisputed control over the whole of Japan and half of Korea.⁶

The spectacular rise of the Soviet Union into a formidable power, not only in East Asia but in all areas of the Eurasian continent adjacent to her boundaries whether in Europe with pressure upon Greece and Turkey or in Iran in the Near East, led the United States to formulate, out of feelings of frustration and a powerful fear of Soviet expansion, the famous containment policy first posited by Kennan, a policy originally applicable only in European conditions, and then embodied in the Truman doctrine. With this doctrine was the onset of the Cold War and its diplomacy. The Russians forced no crisis in Japan, nor in South Korea, and both powers carefully abstained from taking any position of confrontation on the issue of the Chinese civil war.

By 1950, the diplomatic situation in East Asia had begun to change. On the one hand, there had emerged a newly unified China, an active ally of the Soviet Union while on the other, there was Japan, which had been built up, to be an active agent of the United States.

In June of that year, the invasion of South Korea was launched by North Korean forces, well equipped with Russian military material and advised by Soviet military advisors. The Korean invasion most likely was designed to test the United States, to check the growth of American power and to redress what in Russian eyes seemed a loss in the balance of power which resulted from the crumbling of the Yalta equilibrium and the Russian loss of Manchuria which was taken over by the Chinese Communists. To the United States, this invasion was a direct challenge, and South Korea speedily became a symbol of Western strength and determination in this contest between the two superpowers. The Americans argued that to abandon that unfortunate country would indicate to the world at large the American lack of will and confidence. At the same time, the Americans also began to plan a war which eventually saw UN forces going beyond the original line of division of the Korean peninsula, pushing deep into North Korea all the way to the Yalu river into a Soviet zone of global strategy, thus presenting a real threat to the Soviet Union. In addition to this, the United States interposed its Seventh Fleet between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland providing a powerful shield for the Island, in violation of the Yalta agreement that Taiwan would go to China. More fateful in the long run was the United States involvement, after 1950, in Vietnam where the French were being hard pressed by a nationalist Communist movement.

The immediate result of the Korean invasion meant the end of the Yalta

system, a diplomacy based upon the concept of the balance between two super-powers, and led the United States to a line of thinking which argued that Communism's global challenge (of a monolithic nature given to Moscow-Peking axis) would have to be met everywhere. The result was not only a revitalization of Japan, but also a much more vigorous American policy in the whole of Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. Despite these developments, however, both superpowers in the cold war year, carefully managed to avoid a global confrontation which might have led to an atomic war.

The last twenty-five years or so to the present (1976) was a period in which East Asian diplomacy ceased to be dominated by the will and actions of the super-powers and during which, gradually at first and then more rapidly, East Asian nations and their conceptions of the world again began to occupy the fore-front of the stage. This was evidenced by the emergence of the People's Republic to full power and its formulation of a special Maoist Chinese type of diplomatic thought. Japan, at this time too, was beginning to occupy a more powerful position in the Far East, at first with its incredible economic performance, and, lately, with its growing political power. Thus, East Asia today is an area of multi-polarity, in which there exists a finely honed relationship between four powers, the P.R.C., the U.S.S.R., Japan and the United States. One may argue with the proposition that such a situation makes for greater stability; one cannot argue, however, with the clear evidence that both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. are today much less effective in East Asia than before 1950. The U.S. met its doom in the vain attempt to stem Maoist diplomacy in Vietnam, while the U.S.S.R. shared a similar fate in its relations with Peking and later with Japan.⁷

The United States looked upon the diplomacy of a Maoist China as one which combined many aspects of the past, notably the belief in Chinese superiority and ethnocentrism with an active call for world revolution which was to be accomplished by the mobilization of the rural, not the industrial, proletariat. The rural proletariat was to serve as the vanguard of revolution in all of the underdeveloped areas of the globe. In this global struggle, where the "the city and the countryside" will be pitted against each other, wars of national liberation would take place, expelling once and for all Western imperialism and influence. To Americans who oppose this ideological view, it seemed that the United States must rise to combat this form of Asian communism, by becoming the standard bearer of Western values and ideas. In this sense, in East Asia as well as Southeast Asia, diplomacy will cease to be a realistic and pragmatic means of conducting international business, but instead will be carried out with moralistic and ideological fervor.

It had not always been that way. In the days of Franklin Roosevelt, American thinking had always been opposed to colonialism, especially that of the French. However, by the time of Truman, the world had seemingly changed. A monolithic bloc of aggressive communisms organized challenges against the West on all fronts (in Iran, Turkey, Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia), and a policy of containment seemed necessary. Unfortunately, America's first serious response to this development had been Dean Acheson's argument that anti-communism was

more important than anti-colonialism and support to nationalist communism (it had not always been this way, i.e. American support given to Sukarno against the Dutch).

American aid to the French in Vietnam proved useless. The Geneva Conference following France's defeat, seemed to many, above all to Dulles, but a step toward the unification of all Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the Communist, since it provided for the promise of elections which Ho was bound to win. This brought about the American support for a separate nationhood for the South, and assistance given to Diem who was, admittedly, a poor choice. By 1960 the Kennedy administration had begun to look upon Vietnam as a country which justified unlimited American involvement because it would demonstrate that a war of national liberation could be defeated with the use of new means and new techniques, i.e., the lavish use of helicopters and the green berets. Since what was about to take place in Vietnam could also take place in Bolivia or Tanzania, a military situation which may be a precedent for similar incidents all over the world, Washington followed the recommendations of Maxwell Taylor and increased its participation. The sequel to this American decision — the rapid expansion of the war and its Americanization by Johnson, the extension of the conflict by Nixon into Laos and Cambodia and the final, and rather humiliating, American withdrawal — are only too well remembered parts of a sordid story.

By 1972, American diplomacy had learned its lesson, and was ready to return to a more pragmatic and realistic approach, resulting to the Nixon visit to China that year and a willingness to recognize, and make use of Chinese power. This move together with the pragmatism and realism of Chou En-lai, in turn caused the creation of a triangular power relationship between Moscow, Peking and Washington.

The Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-American detente finally permitted a more powerful Japan to emerge, as a vital, although not equal, component. Prime Minister Tanaka's visit to Peking (September 1972) resulted in a very definite rapprochement between Japan and the People's Republic, making possible progress toward a satisfactory Sino-Japanese peace treaty. On the other hand, Japanese relations with the Soviet Union encountered new obstacles. The Russians proved wary of a large scale Japanese involvement in the Siberian oil exploitation, while remaining adamantly opposed to the restoration to Japan of the "northern territories", the southernmost Kurile Islands. Gromyko's recent visit to Tokyo (January 1976) further added to Japan's frustration over these issues, and confirmed her distrust of Russian motives. This strain in the Soviet-Japanese relations stimulated, on the other hand, an even closer and more effective mutual defense tie between Japan and China.

What appears to have taken place, at present, is that East Asian diplomacy is again conducted primarily by the Japanese and the Chinese, rather than the Russians and the Americans. Such an arrangement is probably more feasible.

FOOTNOTES

¹For an excellent presentation of the Confucian world view see: Fairbank, J.K. ed. *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968. Other good accounts include Fairbank, J.K. *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast, 1842-1854*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953; and for present ideology based on the past Mancall, Marc "The Persistence of Tradition in Chinese Foreign Policy", in Joseph Levenson, ed., *Modern China, an Interpretative Anthology*, London: MacMillan, 1971.

²See Wakeman, Frederic "The Opening of China", in Joseph Levenson, ed., *Modern China, an Interpretative Anthology*, London: MacMillan, 1971.

³Among the many excellent studies of imperialism the following are especially recommended. Fieldhouse, D.K. *The Colonial Empires from the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Dell, 1965; Golfwitzer, Heinz, *Europe in the Age of Imperialism 1880-1914*, London: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969; Robinson, R. and Gallagher, J. *Africa and the Victorians: The Climax of Imperialism*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961; Semmel, Bernard *Imperialism and Social Reform, English Social and Imperial Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; and Wehler, H.U. *Bismarck un der Imperialismus*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1959.

⁴See my article: "The Triple Intervention: Japan's Lesson in the Diplomacy of Imperialism", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, p. 122-130.

⁵On Nationalism see Carleton Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism*, New York: MacMillan, 1926 and *The Historical Evolution of Nationalism*, New York: MacMillan, 1931, as well as Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, New York: MacMillan, 1944. On Japanese ultranationalism see George Wilson, *Radical Nationalist in Japan, Kita Ikki*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969. Robert Butow, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, and S.M. Ogata, *Defiance in Manchuria, the Making of Japanese Foreign Policy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964. Very useful also are Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, and Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967, and his *After Imperialism*, New York: Atheneum, 1969.

⁶On the cold war in East Asia see especially Akira Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1974.

⁷For the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China see Harold Hinton, *Communist China and World Politics*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966; and also W. Chai, *The Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, New York: Putnams, 1972, as well as K.C. Chen, *The Foreign Policy of China, Roseland, N.J.: Seton Hall University Press, 1972*.