

CHAPTER 7 THE ILLUSION OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

3. LAWLESSNESS AND VIOLENCE IN THE “REAL” CHINA

Three competing governments

At the Washington Conference the signatories to the Nine-Power Treaty agreed to “respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China,” as well as the “principles of the Open Door.” Needless to say, the main purpose of the treaty was to discourage Japanese advancement into Manchuria, Mongolia, and China.¹ The US, the host nation of the Washington Conference, had embraced an extremely optimistic presumption, i.e., if constraints were placed on Japanese activity there, China would suddenly transform itself into a modern sovereign nation. But post-Washington-Conference China, the “real” China, tore that rose-colored forecast to shreds. The US was visualizing the ideal China, not the real China. The Washington Conference moved forward on the basis of that delusion, and established the Washington system. The Japanese were far less optimistic — they saw China for what it was. Unfortunately, Japan was overpowered by the idealistic Americans’ diplomacy. What was the political situation in China after the Washington Conference? It was chaotic and disunified, due to (1) strife among warlords’ militias, and (2) the communist movement.

Soviet overtures to China began with Lev Karakhan’s manifestos (issued in 1919 and 1920). Ten years had passed since the 1911 (Xinhai) Revolution, but China remained disunified. Conflicts among warlords raged, and the May Fourth Movement (1919), had ignited the bitter flames of nationalism. This state of affairs made China the perfect breeding ground for communism. And inevitably, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) was founded in July 1921.

Meanwhile, the warlords were battling fiercely. In April 1922 the 1st Zhili-Fengtian War was fought. Wu Peifu of the Jilin militia defeated Zhang Zuolin of the Fengtian militia; Zhang fled to Manchuria. But in May, the undaunted Zhang issued a declaration of independence in connection with the three eastern provinces that comprise Manchuria: Fengtian, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. At this point China had three governments (one in Beijing, another in Guandong, and a third in Fengtian). Less than three months after the Nine-Power Treaty was signed in Washington, China had unraveled into three regimes. The “ideal China” that the Washington Conference had envisioned proved to be a delusion, one of China’s own making. Since, at that time, there was no other nation with three governments, we must conclude that China did not qualify as a nation.

Regular Chinese soldiers indistinguishable from bandits

Local rebels’ frequent acts of violence against foreigners illustrate the barbarous nature of China at the time. I shall describe one of them, referred to in the Western world as the Lincheng Outrage.

In May 1923, near Lincheng on the Tianjin-Pukou Railway in Shandong province, a horde of bandits attacked an express train bound for Tianjin from Pukou. The bandits took as hostages

¹ *Ibid.*

more than 20 citizens of the UK, the US, France, Italy, Denmark, and Mexico, whose numbers included women and children, thereby temporarily capturing the world's attention. The hostages were confined to a mountain fortress used by the bandits. The bandits demanded that their contingent be reorganized into a regular army unit. The Chinese government responded by assigning military status to more than 2,000 bandits who possessed guns and organizing them into a brigade headed by a bandit chief. After the government promised the remaining bandits that they would be given travel money and exempted from punishment, the hostages were released.

This was a shocking incident, especially to foreign residents of China. They were pessimistic about China's future, some even proposed scrapping the Nine-Power Treaty as it applied to China. There were debates among foreign diplomats stationed in Beijing suggested that there be joint policing of China by the world's powers. Japan, however, was strongly opposed to international supervision of China and lobbied against it, fearing that such an arrangement might result in the partitioning of that nation. But the Japanese lack of reverence for the spirit of the Washington Conference, as demonstrated during the resolution of the Lincheng Outrage, seemed to cause the other powers to view Japan with distrust.²

Reorganizing bandits into regular army units is an astonishing concept, but the bandits did have a prescribed military training program. Moreover, they had a command hierarchy and were in possession of a great number of weapons. Therefore, it was less expensive to "purchase" groups of bandits than to undergo the not insignificant expense of purchasing weapons and training regular soldiers. However, yesterday's bandits may have been transformed into today's regular soldiers, but that does not mean that they forsook their customary criminal activities and became upstanding citizens. Once a bandit, always a bandit. Furthermore, in China, where there was no conscription system in place, it was customary to hire coolies when the need arose to recruit soldiers, given the salary and other benefits (or lack thereof) offered. Young men from good families simply did not serve in the military. Consequently, there was little distinguishable difference between bandits and regular soldiers, as far as character and behavior were concerned. That is why in China one of the prerequisites of being regular soldiers in wartime of war was the opportunity to plunder areas they were stationed in or passed through. In peacetime, when pay tended to be insufficient, such behavior was generally tolerated. Bandit-soldiers commonly engaged in their customary practice of looting, but they also attacked and even slaughtered defenseless people wherever they went. They also solicited "contributions" from local chambers of commerce or similar organizations when they withdrew from a locale. They were often exempted from punishment when they looted, and it was not unusual for them to collect huge amounts of money as a reward for leaving an area.³

²Gaimushō gaikō shiryōkan (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), ed., "*Rinjō jiken*" (Lincheng outrage) in *Nihon gaikō shi jiten* (A lexicon of Japanese diplomatic history) (Tokyo: Ōkurashō insatsukyoku (Printing Bureau, Ministry of Finance), 1979).

³Kijima gaikō kenkyūshitsu (Kijima diplomatic research institute), ed., *Haigai Shina no kaibo* (Anatomy of xenophobic China) (Tokyo: Kokusai Keizai Kenkyūjo, 1937).

The Chinese aphorism “Good iron is not used to make nails, and good men do not become soldiers” aptly illustrates the abysmally inferior quality of Chinese soldiers. We must remember that the poor performance of Chinese units due to lack of leadership and their tendencies toward plundering, violence, and slaughter was, in large part, the cause of most of the conflicts between China and other nations. Therefore, the challenge of finding effective ways to contend with Chinese troops, and to protect foreign residents from their acts of violence was a huge cause of concern to the Japanese government. It was also the reason for dissimilarities in domestic opinion, as well as the difference between the China policy of Japan and that of the other powers.

Manchuria’s *de facto* independence

In 1924 the GMD (Chinese Nationalist Party) decided to join with the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) to form the First United Front. The CCP immediately got to work, making full use of the name, and at the same time launching a concerted effort to splinter the GMD’s internal workings and ultimately topple the party.

In that same year, diplomatic relations were established between the USSR and China. On May 31, 1924 two treaties between the two nations were signed: (1) The Sino-Soviet Agreement on General Principles for the Settlement of the Questions Between the Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and (2) Agreement for the Provisional Management of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The first pertained to the establishment of diplomatic relations, and the second, to joint operation of the railroad.

However, what we need to be mindful of is that, on September 20 of the same year, Zhang Zuolin’s Fengtian government concluded an identical agreement with the Soviets pertaining to operation of the Chinese Eastern Railway. What are we to make of this? The Lytton Report, which evaluated the Manchurian Incident (1931) for the League of Nations, offers the following:

In July 1922, when [Zhang Zuolin] failed to establish his authority south of the Great Wall and saw his rivals taking control of the Peking Government, he renounced allegiance to the Central Government and maintained complete independence of action in Manchuria until he extended his authority south of the Wall and became master of Peking as well. He expressed his willingness to respect foreign rights, and accepted the obligations of China, but he requested foreign Powers to negotiate henceforth directly with his administration in all matters concerning Manchuria.

Accordingly, he repudiated the Sino-Soviet Agreement of May 31st, 1924, though very advantageous to China, and persuaded the U.S.S.R. to conclude a separate agreement with him in September 1924. It was virtually identical with that of May 31st, 1924, with the Central Government. This fact emphasized Chang Tso-lin’s [Zhang Zuolin’s] insistence on the recognition of his complete independence of action, both in domestic and foreign policy.⁴

⁴ Commission of Enquiry, Earl of Lytton, *Situation in Manchuria: Report of the Lytton Commission of Inquiry* (Geneva: League of Nations Publications, 1932), 28;

The fact that Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian government signed an agreement exactly the same as that signed between China and the USSR tells us that Zhang was stating, in no uncertain terms, that the three eastern provinces (Manchuria) were independent of China. It also tells us that the USSR recognized Manchuria as an autonomous region controlled by the Fengtian government and independent of the Chinese Central Government. Zhang Zuolin, who in the preceding year, had issued a declaration of independence for Manchuria, in 1924 was now making that same assertion via diplomatic means.

The Chinese maintained that the three eastern provinces (Manchuria) were Chinese territory, and later complained of Japanese aggression when Manzhouguo was founded. But the truth is that the two aforementioned agreements prove that, as early as 1923-24, Manchuria was already an autonomous region *not* under the control of the Chinese Central Government. If Manchuria was indeed part of China, then the objectives of the Nine-Power Treaty and the Washington Conference, both of which had sworn "to respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China," were proven to be illusions.

Japan supports tariff autonomy for China

One of the agreements concluded at the Washington Conference was the Treaty Between the Nine Powers Concerning the Chinese Customs Tariff. That agreement called for the holding of the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff, which commenced on October 26, 1925 in Beijing. Thirteen nations participated: Japan, the UK, the US, France, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and China. The treaty stated that the primary objective of the Special Conference was to agree upon matters relating to the revision of the Chinese customs tariff, with a view toward increasing the annual revenue of the Chinese government.

The Chinese delegation, intoxicated by nationalistic fervor, was scheming to restore tariff autonomy in one fell swoop at this conference. But neither the UK (nor the US, which had in principle supported Chinese demands for the restoration of Chinese national sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Conference) had any intention of agreeing immediately to the new Chinese demands. The UK delegation stated that they were opposed to the Western powers' addressing this topic until China had quelled internecine warfare, demonstrated that it was capable of protecting the lives and property of foreign residents, and had succeeded in functioning like a unified, independent nation. The US (and the UK) stated that the minimum requirement for Chinese tariff autonomy was the elimination of the *lijin*, an interprovincial tariff.

The Japanese, on the other hand, approached the conference with a plan that agreed with the desires of the Chinese for tariff autonomy. At the opening ceremony, Hioki Eki, the head of the Japanese delegation and minister plenipotentiary, delivered a speech that supported Chinese demands, no doubt at the behest of Foreign Minister Shidehara,.

Hioki began his speech by referring to events that occurred after Japan opened itself up to the world, an era during which Japan did not enjoy tariff autonomy.

The Japanese people, dissatisfied as they were with such arrangements,⁵ were sensible of their own shortcomings. They perceived that the weakness of their international position was but a result of their internal weakness. They saw the futility of all attempts to remove the effect without removing its cause. In this conviction they set to work silently, steadily, resolutely, with their eyes fixed upon the completion of all reforms needed in their domestic administration.

(...)

China is still following the same path that we once pursued. The difficulties, the embarrassments and the perplexities that confront China to-day have once been ours. The Japanese Delegation will approach the problems before this Conference with sympathy and understanding and with intimate apprehension of the Chinese position. I am happy to state at the outset that the Japanese Delegation are fully prepared to consider in the friendliest way the question of tariff autonomy which appears in the agenda presented by the Chinese Delegation.⁶

When the speech ended, the head of the Chinese delegation conveyed his appreciation to Hioki.

At the Washington Conference, a surtax had already been agreed upon, i.e., 2.5% on ordinary goods, and 5% on luxury goods. However, at the Special Conference, the Chinese delegation, dissatisfied with such a low rate, demanded a much higher surtax. Their demand precipitated a difference of opinion between China and Japan, which was unwilling to accept anything other than the Washington surtax rate.

Since at that time it seemed that there was no end in sight to internecine strife, fueled by battles between warlord militias, the participating delegations began to feel reluctant about immediate implementation of an import surtax; the conference seemed about to dissolve any number of times. Then, in April 1926, the government led by Duan Qirui collapsed because of a coup d'état, and Beijing was plunged into anarchy. On July 3 the conference was postponed until such time as a legitimate government was established in China.

Lack of faith in China causes Washington-Conference spirit to founder

Judging from the situation prevailing in China when the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff was taking place, not to mention the discrepancies among participating nations as far as China policy was concerned, the spirit of the Washington Conference seemed to have foundered in the short space of three years.

Even the Americans were quite pessimistic about China, concluding that it had in fact descended into anarchy. For instance, after touring South China, Ferdinand L. Mayer, counselor at the American Legation in Beijing, recommended that the "US cease to cherish the myth of China's

⁵ Hioki was referring to extraterritoriality and a disadvantageous customs tariff.

⁶ "Tariff Conference Opened with Great Ceremony," *The North-China Herald*, 31 October 1925.

territorial and administrative integrity and deal individually with the various ‘semi-autonomous regions’ into which the country was divided.”⁷

Also, back in the US, Washington government officials were now gloomy about China’s future. Nelson Johnson, head of the State Department’s Far Eastern Division, wrote the following in a personal letter: “History ... will record that Chinese would-be nationalists did what the United States tried to prevent, namely, divided China. One looks in vain for Jeffersons and Franklins capable and unselfish enough to bring these people together.”⁸

Other nations’ wariness of China can also be perceived from the conclusions arrived at by the Commission on Extraterritoriality in China, which met at about the same time as the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff. Participating nations were in agreement that it would not make sense to put an end to extraterritoriality, at least not right away. According to a report issued by the Commission in September 1926, China would first have to establish “a unified system of laws, judicial independence from military authorities and executive branches of government, and extension of the system of modern courts, prisons, and detention houses.”⁹

I believe I have demonstrated that, a mere four years after the Washington Conference, the world’s faith in China as a nation was plummeting rapidly. The spirit and ideals of that conference had clearly disintegrated. Japan took the initiative in supporting China’s demands for tariff autonomy at the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff. That gesture changed Chinese sentiment toward Japan for the better, at least temporarily. Furthermore, the decision to support China in its quest for tariff autonomy certainly served as a stepping stone to the signing of the Treaty Regulating Tariff Relations Between the US and China on July 25, 1928, as well as subsequent similar agreements with other nations. It was typical of what was referred to at the time as “Shidehara diplomacy.”

Unfortunately, Japan’s diplomatic efforts on behalf of China elicited no corresponding repayment. In 1927, the year following the Special Conference on the Chinese Customs Tariff, instead of thanks, what a now red China offered to Japan were violent, hateful campaigns like the Nanjing and Hankou incidents.

⁷ Iriye Akira, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.