

Entangling Alliances: America, Japan, and China in the Wake of WWI

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Author Bio

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Abstract

In 1914-1917, the United States actively encouraged China to join World War I (1914-1918), but Japan firmly resisted China's participation in the war. At the end of the war, the attitudes of the United States and Japan switched. Japan tried to encourage China to join the war, whilst the United States tried to prevent China from participating. The change in the attitudes of the United States and Japan towards China is by no means a coincidence, but a concrete manifestation of the competition between the two sides for the dominance of their diplomacy with China. This essay discusses such a switch in their attitude with primary sources and the reason behind such switch. The first stage, starts from 1914 and ends in early 1917, is Japanese deterrence and American encouragement; the second stage, starts from early 1917, is Japanese encouragement and American deterrence.

Keywords: China; Chinese History; First World War; Chinese Diplomacy; Beiyang Government; Beijing Government; American Diplomacy; Japanese Diplomacy.

Introduction

On 28 July 1914, the First World War triggered by the Sarajevo incident broke out in Europe. Almost the whole of Europe broke into two opposing sides: the Entente and the Central Powers. The Entente was led by Britain, France, Russia and Serbia, whilst the Central Power was led by Germany and Austria-Hungary. On August 23, 1914, Japan declared war on Germany, igniting the fire of World War I to Asia.

Dispute over Shandong

The dispute over Shandong refers to the controversy over the ownership of the Chinese province of Shandong. The problem involved China, Germany, and Japan, and their respective claims to Shandong. Shandong was a province of China. In 1898, Germany leased the Jiaozhou Bay area from China for 99 years and established a concession in Qingdao, a major city in Shandong. However, during World War I, Japan seized control of Qingdao from Germany in 1914 and occupied the area for the rest of the war.

Why did Japan Enter the War?

The casus belli for Japan to declare war on Germany was to fulfil the obligations of the British-Japanese Alliance, but Japan's major purpose was to seize German concessions, including Qingdao, and sphere of influence in Shandong, China (Blake & Louis, 1993, p. 276). The war between Japan and Germany in Asia began rapidly. On November 7, 1914, the German army in Qingdao surrendered to the Japanese army. Jiaozhou Bay, the German colony in Shandong, went under the control of Japan, and the whole province of Shandong was put under the Japanese sphere of influence.

China's initial attitude towards the war

From the very beginning of the outbreak of the First World War, China's rulers and senior officials were keenly aware that China should join this unprecedented war, improve its international status, and withdraw privileges seized by foreign powers. After Japan took Shandong by force, Duan Qirui, Premier of the Republic of China, realised that China need to participate in the World War, because only by joining the Entente to fight against

Germany could the Shandong issue be included in the post-war peace conference, and China could also reclaim Qingdao (Gray, 2002, p. 168-169). However, Li Yuanhong, President of the Republic of China, suspected that Duan was taking advantage of the participation to expand his own power, and was thus unwilling to follow Duan and started the debate (Wang, 2005).

Concerning whether to join such an unprecedented war, there was a heated debate in Beijing: First, which side would eventually win the victory? Second, what actions would Japan take (since Japan did not join in the war immediately)? Eventually, the voice advocating severance of diplomatic relations with Germany outweighed the voice advocating neutrality in early 1917. Nevertheless, both because of the opposition and Japanese pressure, China did not join the Entente before early 1917.

Literature Review

Research on the diplomatic history of China and the First World War is a relatively weak field in China's modern history. When it comes to the modern history of China during the First World War I, historians pay more attention to several historical concepts or nodes such as the Beiyang Government, the Twenty-First Demand and the May Fourth Movement. However, the study of World War I in the context of diplomatic history is relatively weak.

After the war broke out, the Chinese government led by Yuan Shikai declared neutrality towards the European war on August 6, 1914. Most scholars concluded in the papers that China taking a neutral stand would have a negative impact on China. In recent years, a different perspective has emerged. The neutrality declaration of the Beijing government seemed to be a safe and timely countermeasure. Under ordinary circumstances, such countermeasures should not cause controversy. Nevertheless, China was confronted with a dilemma: First, both sides of the war owned concessions with the presence of garrisons; secondly, Japan, a strong neighbour, was likely to join the war because of its alliance with Britain. In order to maintain its neutrality, the Beijing government has made effort to seek a guarantee of neutrality among the United States, Japan, and Britain, although in vain (Wang, 2005).

Some historians believe that the Yuan Shikai government's neutrality position was declared at the outbreak of the First World War, not when Japan attacked Shandong. In addition, historians generally believe that the Beijing government continued to maintain a policy of neutrality when Japan sent troops to Shandong, abandoning Shandong that China could have recovered. But the Chinese people at that time, mainly intellectuals, generally supported the decision of Yuan Shikai's government (Chen, 2005).

Regarding the debate over China's participation in the war, historians, particularly Chinese historians, have long believed that such debate reflected the competition among imperialist powers for supreme rights in China. All factions in China wanted to take advantage of the participation to obtain assistance from a foreign power in order to consolidate their respective domestic strength. Foreign powers also want to use their support for the Chinese factions to expand their colonial rights in China (Wu, 1990).

Some studies have focused on the role of certain individuals in promoting China's participation in the war, such as Duan Qirui, Liang Shiyi, and George Ernest Morrison (Yang, 1993). Scholars believe that there was political and economic consideration behind Duan Qirui's insistence of participation. First, it is based on his own understanding of the situation at home and abroad; Secondly, he wanted to postpone the payment of boxer indemnities, raise tariffs, borrow foreign debts, solve his government's financial difficulties, and maintain normal rule by participating in the war, rather than the result of being influenced by Japan. Japan's support had a certain influence on Duan Qirui's participation in the war, but it was not a decisive factor. The close relationship between Japan and Duan Qirui began after the Zhiwan War in 1920. Morrison played a certain role by advising the Chinese government, passing various information about China's participation in the war to Western powers, and lobbying senior Japanese politicians (Cai, 2009). Liang Qichao actively advocated that China join the Entente to declare war on Germany. Because this was consistent with Duan Qirui's policy of participating in the war, it caused criticism from the contemporaries (Liu, 1999).

This paper, however, pays less attention to the disagreement among the individuals in Beijing and focuses more on the comparison between Japanese and American diplomatic strategies towards their stand

on China's participation and the motivations behind their stand. Primary sources from these three countries would be adopted to help present the analysis.

First Stage: Japanese deterrence and American Encouragement

Beijing's hesitation

As mentioned, Beijing's hesitation in the very beginning was due to two contradicting views between Duan, who advocated participation, and Li, who was unwilling to follow Duan and join the war.

The first time the Beijing government moved to join the war was before Japan captured Jiaozhou Bay. At that time, Zhang Guogan, the former secretary-general of the State Council, proposed to Duan Qirui that China should declare war on Germany. "Concerning the Qingdao issue, if Japan preempts us under the pretext of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, it will be extremely difficult to deal with, and there will be more entanglements in the future"(Xu, 1954, p. 51). But this claim has not attracted enough attention. Although Duan Qirui was also in favour of declaring war on Germany, other military and political leaders, represented by president Li Yuanhong, did not advocate getting involved, so the discussion was shelved.

When Japan was about to send troops to Shandong, Liang Shiyi, then tax supervisor, advised Yuan Shikai that before Japan sent troops, China should reach an agreement with Britain about Qingdao as soon as possible. He suggested that while negotiating with the German envoys, China should send troops simultaneously to besiege Qingdao and compel Germany to return Qingdao. "If Qingdao falls into our hand, how would Japan be able to send troops (to Shandong)? This is not to prevent Japanese aggression, but to prevent future troubles" (Jin, 2006, p. 51). In response to the suggestions of Liang Shiyi and others, the Beijing government had "seriously considered the policy of declaring war on Germany," (Jin, 2006, p. 5) but no final decision was made due to the contradiction between Duan and Li. Japan also warned that "Now that China has already declared neutrality, there shall be no reason to participate" (Wang, 2005, p. 43), thus the hawks had no choice but to give up.

Japan's Deterrence of China's Participation:

After Japan had seized Shandong and proposed the Twenty-One Demands, there were once again appeals within the Beijing government to join the war to resolve Sino-Japanese disputes. Now, the Entente also anticipated China's joining the Entente. In November 1915, the envoys of Britain, Russia and France to China advised China to join the alliance, hoping that China would "sell the munitions to the Russian army" and "prevent the Germans from using China as their base to smuggle munitions to India". This piece of message aroused great concern in Japan. The Japanese Minister to China, Hioki Eki, was ordered to go to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to inquire whether this was true. Japanese newspapers angrily condemned Britain's intentional alienation of Japan on the issue of China. On November 23, the ambassadors of Britain, France and Russia to Tokyo formally requested Japanese Foreign Minister Ishii Kikujirō to cooperate in this regard and work with the governments of the three countries to persuade China to join the Entente. Ishii, however, opposed this plan and frankly stated that Japan must treat China carefully, and declared: "Japan can hardly be calm when China organises an elite army for it to enter the war. Additionally, Japan cannot help being worried about the economic liberation of a country with a population of 400 million." (Morse & MacNair, 1931, p. 563) In the face of Japan's tough attitude, China had to postpone participation in the war again. British Foreign Minister Gray ordered Ambassador Green to visit the second official of the Japanese Foreign Ministry on November 27 to guarantee that Britain would never ally with China unless they discussed that with Japan (Tao, 1958, p. 140-141).

Proposals of Beijing to participate in the First World War were all stranded, and the biggest international resistance came from Japan. However, due to the intimidation of Japan, the Beijing government has kept this secret. The cause for China's reluctance was not officially revealed until the request for the abolition of the Twenty-one Demands was submitted to the Paris Peace Conference:

"If it were not for Japan's attitude, China would have already joined the Entente to fight against enemies in Central Europe. Japan's attitude is that it was eager to inherit Germany's privileges in Shandong. In August

1915, the Chinese government declared that it was ready to fight against Germany and attack the German garrison in Qingdao. At that time, we hesitated precisely because some people in the government believed that doing so would easily lead to disputes with third countries. By November 1915, the Chinese government expressed several times its desire to join the alliance and participate in the war, but it was still rejected by the Japanese government."(Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1984, p. 192)

These words demonstrate China's emphasis on the factor of Japanese deterrence in preventing China from joining the Entente before 1917 so that China had a greater chance to withdraw the privileges of Japan in Shandong because Japan emphasised its great contribution and casualty compared with those of China during the war.

Motivations behind Japanese deterrence

The direct reason for Japanese deterrence was that Japan inherited Germany's privileges in Shandong through a rapid assault against Germany at the beginning of the war. If China joined the war, it would inevitably demand abolishment in the post-war peace conference, and the peace conference might have led to the return of Shandong, which was not benefiting Japan. This is the result that Japan does not want to see anyway, so Japan must do everything possible to prevent China from participating in the war to create a situation that is beneficial to its own country.

And the root cause of Japan's resistance to China's participation in the war is that after the outbreak of the war. The European powers were mired in the quagmire of war and were unable to take care of the Far East, while Japan took the opportunity to reap a series of "achievements" that were beneficial to itself in China, and gained the "supreme" right to speak on China's issues. In order to declare its "special status" in China to the big powers, Japan wanted to resist China's participation in the war when the Entente preferred China's participation in the war, and in this way extorted as much profit as possible from the Entente.

Concern from the US on Japanese Arrogance

Japan's growing arrogance over other countries, including both the Entente and Central Powers, in China affairs has caused deep concern in the United States. US Minister Paul Samuel Reinsch in China reported to the State Department that the British position in China was increasingly isolated due to Japanese actions. Japan is becoming the most active power in affecting China's diplomacy. Reinsch stated that, along with European interests, the US interest in China was also harmed by Japan (U.S. Department of State [DOS], 1940, p. 429-430). Upon learning of Reinsch's report, US President Wilson quickly instructed Secretary of State Robert Lansing that it is time to warn Japan in a friendly and frank way that they were closely watching its attempt to further control China (DOS, 1940, p. 430).

Reinsch's Effort in promoting China's entering the war

On February 3, 1917, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Germany due to Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare against the Allies, and at the same time suggested that other neutral countries take joint action with it. Reinsch regarded this action of the United States as a good opportunity to compete with Japan for political dominance in China, and immediately launched active diplomatic activities in China. On the same day, he visited Beijing President Li Yuanhong and Prime Minister Duan Qirui, and then visited military and political officials, pointing out that the severance of diplomatic relations with Germany represents the side of justice, and that participating in the war can prevent China from continuing to be trapped in factional struggles; China would also have a say in post-war conference (Wang, 1988, p. 101). The Beijing government conducted a careful study of Reinsch's proposal, and at the same time asked the United States to give corresponding economic assistance. Unauthorised assurance to China: If the Chinese government agrees with the US President's proposal to break off diplomatic relations, the US government will take measures to allocate the required funds... and the United States can also use most of the boxer indemnity to support the Chinese government (Reinsch, 1982).

After receiving such assurances, the Beijing government submitted a formal statement to Reinsch on February 9, stating that it was determined to take concerted action with the U.S. government, and promised that if the U.S. government deemed it sufficient to declare war on the German government, the Chinese government would at least serve diplomatic relations with Germany (Cheng, 1988, p. 278-279). On the same day, the Chinese government submitted a document to Germany protesting its unlimited submarine warfare.

Motivations for America to Advocate China's Participation

The US encouragement in the first stage was mainly due to the need to compete with Japan for political dominance over China. For a long time, the United States has pursued an open-door policy in China. The essence of this policy is to maintain equal business opportunities in China and safeguard the integrity of China's territory and sovereignty. During the First World War, Japan implemented a series of acts that undermined the open-door policy in China, such as forcibly seizing Germany's leased land and sphere of influence in Shandong, and proposing the Twenty-One Demands aimed at monopolising privileges in China, which aroused strong dissatisfaction in the United States. And Japan's increasing superiority over other poor countries on the China issue has made the United States even more anxious. Therefore, the United States wanted to take the opportunity of announcing the severance of diplomatic relations with Germany to win over China to take concerted actions with it, so as to gain the initiative in diplomacy with China.

Second Stage: American Deterrence and Japanese Encourage

Discrepancy between Reinsch and US state department

It was not until after China lodged a formal protest against Germany that Reinsch received instructions from the State Department that he had gone too far in urging China to cooperate (Reinsch, 1982, p. 190). He was also told not to give (China)

any promises or guarantees, and not to take any other actions before receiving further instructions (DOS, 1940, p. 408). Immediately afterwards, Lansing ordered Reinsch to inform China that the U.S. government highly appreciated China's position, but did not want to lead it into a dangerous situation. It regrets that it is practically impossible to give China any guarantees. Therefore (with regard to diplomacy with Germany) China should seek the opinion of the Entente, and Japan's attitude should also be taken seriously (DOS, 1940, p. 408).

Japanese Response of China's Condemnation

After learning that China followed the United States in submitting a document of protest to Germany, Japanese Foreign Minister Moto met with Chinese Minister Zhang Zongxiang on February 9 and blamed China: "For China's protest against Germany, we deeply regret that China did not contact Japan beforehand. Now that the two countries are trying to bridge the gap." At the same time, he also suggested that "just protesting will not help to improve China's international status, it is better to immediately announce the severance of diplomatic relations with Germany." (Cheng, 1988, p. 278-279) On February the 12th, Japanese Minister Yoshizawa told Prime Minister Duan Qirui in person, again hoping that the Beijing government would ignore Germany's reply and immediately cut off diplomatic relations with Germany (Wang, 2005, p. 84). Since then, Japan has repeatedly urged China to break off diplomatic relations with Germany and even join the First World War, and agreed in principle to China's proposals such as increasing tariffs and easing compensation (Wang, 2005, p. 85). Japan also lured Duan Qirui, and the loans Japan provided to China could be used by him to wipe out other factions in the country (Xu, 1954, p. 51).

Motivations for Japan to Advocate China's Participation

One of the reasons for Japan to prompt China to join the war is that when it saw that China followed the United States in protesting against Germany, it had to adjust its strategy in time to prevent the United States from further gaining a leading position in China's diplomacy. As Kizo Nishihara pointed out to

the Japanese government many times: "If we just sit back and watch (China) be drawn into the Entente by the United States, it will also cause cracks in the hard-won foundation of Sino-Japanese friendship." (Wang, 2005, p. 72)

The second reason is that when Germany implemented unrestricted submarine warfare, the Entente's materials became scarce, and they eagerly hoped that China would join the war to take advantage of China's manpower and food resources. Under such circumstances, it is impossible for Japan to go its own way and completely ignore the opinions of the Allies.

The third reason, which is also the most important one, is that Japan has already handled the Shandong issue at this time, and signed a series of secret treaties with the Entente, which can reverse the adverse effects that China's participation in the war can bring to it. The former, such as January 18, 1915, Japan brazenly threw out the Twenty-One Demands to China. The Twenty-One demands were divided into five parts, and the first part is about the Shandong issue. It required the Chinese government to promise that any agreement on the transfer of Shandong rights that Japan planned to sign with Germany in the future would be fully recognized. After negotiating for a long time with Japan, China finally signed the Minsi Treaty with it, and basically accepted the conditions proposed by Japan on the Shandong issue. This paved the way for China to raise the Shandong issue at the peace conference in the future. For example, in January 1917, when Britain begged Japan to send a destroyer to escort the Mediterranean Sea, Japan told Britain that if Britain was willing to support Japan's demands for Shandong and the Pacific islands north of the equator at future peace conferences, then Japan would fulfill British wishes.

Although the price was very high, Britain agreed to this quid pro quo (Wang, 2005, p. 72-73). Afterwards, Japan followed the same pattern and conducted approximately the same negotiations with France, Russia, and Italy, and reached a mutual secret treaty on the Shandong issue. These wartime transactions constituted the "reef of the Shandong issue" (Wang, 2005, p. 73) at the peace conference. At the same time, the conclusion of the understanding between Japan and Britain, France, Russia, and Italy also meant that the members of the main Entente except the United States were unanimously siding with

Japan on the Far East issue, tacitly acquiescing Japan's dominance in diplomacy with China. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Japan supported China's entry into the war.

Shift of American Attitude

When Japan turned from boycotting China to urging China to fight, the United States turned from supporting China's entering WWI to opposing China's entering WWI. On February 10, Lansing instructed Reinsch to tell the Beijing government that the United States did not want to see China participate in a world war; then Reinsch was instructed to say that Europe does not need China to participate in the war, and the Chinese government "should not take further action" before consulting with the US government (DOS, 1940, p. 412).

Motivations for America to Block China's Participation

However, why did the United States oppose China's participation in the war later? Obviously, the change in Japan's attitude towards China's participation in the war forced the United States to make corresponding adjustments in its attitude towards China's participation in the war. Japan's more active involvement has frustrated the United States' desire to act as the leader of China's policy toward Germany, and the United States' support for China's participation in the war has lost its original meaning. Furthermore, the United States found that if China joined Japan in the war, China would be clearly placed under Japan's control, and the outcome would be that China would actually have to accept the Twenty-One Demands proposed by Japan two years ago (Wilson, 1986, p. 61). In this context, it is logical that the United States turned against China's participation in the war.

Dispute between President and State Council

The different attitudes between the United States and Japan caused fierce disputes within the Beijing government. President Li Yuanhong worried that Duan Qirui would further expand his power in the name of participating in the war, so he opposed participation in the war with the support of the United States; Prime Minister Duan Qirui advocated participation in the war with the support of Japan out

of considerations such as borrowing foreign debts and expanding the army. This led to a struggle between the president Li Yuanhong and the State Council headed by Duan Qirui. However, the behind-the-scenes manipulators of this power struggle are the United States and Japan respectively. After a series of conflicts, the Duan faction gained the upper hand, and the Beijing government decided to follow Japan's suggestion to break off diplomatic relations with Germany.

Severing Diplomatic Relation with Germany

On February 14, the State Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Beijing government jointly called Minister Zhang Zongxiang to Japan, ordering him to tell Japan: "The government has decided that if a German submarine hits a neutral ship, China will break off diplomatic relations with Germany." In addition, the representative of China said that this action would "cost a lot", and hopes that the Entente can "allow China to increase tariffs at its discretion, and ease or extend the term of Boxer indemnity." (Wang, 2005, p. 84)

The Japanese government took the opportunity to step in. On February the 17th, the field said to Zhang Zongxiang: "Japan is in favour of raising taxes and easing compensation, but after China breaks diplomatic relations with Germany, Japan must deal with other countries on behalf of China." On March the 10th and 11th, the Beijing Senate and House of Representatives successively passed the case of severing diplomatic relations with Germany. On March the 14th, President Li Yuanhong issued a proclamation announcing that severed the diplomatic link between China and Germany.

Declaration of War

After China severed diplomatic ties with Germany, Japan and other allies urged China to declare war on Germany immediately so they could discuss proposals such as increasing tariffs. However, the United States opposed China's entry into the war. On March 13, the US State Department told China not to take any further action until the US joined the war. With support from the US and Japan, the Dispute between the President and State Council reached its climax.

In late April, Duan Qirui tried to force the National Assembly to pass the war entry bill. On May 1, the Japanese envoy threatened political turmoil if the proposal was rejected, and Li Yuanhong agreed to submit the case to the National Assembly for debate. The National Assembly postponed the discussion in mid-May. Duan Qirui asked Li to dissolve the National Assembly, but Li refused. In late May, Li dismissed Duan after secret discussions with the US Minister. Duan's subordinates declared independence, and provincial governors asked Li to resign. Li ordered Zhang Xun to mediate, leading to Zhang's coup on June 30, declaring Puyi emperor the next day. With Japanese support, Duan sent troops against Zhang Xun. Zhang fled to the Dutch embassy on July 12, and Puyi abdicated. Duan officially declared war on Germany on August 14, after clearing obstacles.

Conclusion

Fearing China's potential demand of reclaiming Shandong and attempting to show its supremacy over Chinese diplomacy, Japan initially blocked China from entering WWI. In accordance, America initially encouraged China's participation to contain Japan's growing influence over China (which is consistent with its open-door policy) and keep its own influence. Nevertheless, both countries shifted their attitude in early 1917. Japan turned to supporting China's participation because of the influence of the US, the need for Chinese resources from the Entente, and the guarantee of Japanese interest in Shandong from its allies. In contrast, the US turned to blocking Chinese entry because the US found itself no longer able to be the leading power in terms of Chinese diplomacy, and China would have to accept Japanese demands harmful to America if China followed Japanese advocacy.

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