Edited by
Merle Goldman
Andrew Gordon

Historical Perspectives on Contemporary East Asia

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Prior to the nineteenth century, Westerners engaged the countries of East Asia only when their presence was welcomed or tolerated by Asian governments. They came primarily in search of opportunities to trade and, in far smaller numbers, to preach Christianity. Few reached Korea, and those who established themselves in China and Japan on occasion offended their hosts. At various times Western merchants and priests could be and were expelled or executed in all three countries. Neither the Vatican nor the great powers of Europe could protect their subjects from the laws of Asian states or the caprice of Asian rulers. Simply stated, the conditions under which Westerners operated in China, Japan, and Korea were determined exclusively by the rulers of those countries. East Asians participated in the global economic and diplomatic systems on their own terms.

The mid-nineteenth century was a watershed in the history of international relations. The East Asian order over which China had been at least nominally dominant for thousands of years shattered. Western power proved itself superior to that of Asia, largely owing to advanced military technology, improvements in military discipline and supply, and the co-opting of native forces on the Indian subcontinent. By force and intimidation, the West, led by Great Britain, dictated the new terms of contact in a series of treaties that included fixed tariffs and extraterritoriality—the exemption of foreigners from local law. The erosion of central power in China and Japan facilitated the Western intrusion. By 1870, most of East Asia had been opened to Western goods and ideas.

Resistance to the Western-organized international system, to what Asians called the "unequal treaties," remained strong. Korea, into which Western influence dribbled indirectly from China, had repelled all efforts to force open its doors to trade with the Europeans and Americans. Powerful provin-
cial forces in Japan remained determined to "expel the barbarians." China had preserved its territorial integrity, and students of statecraft were already preparing to strengthen the country and enable it to stand up to its tormentors. The victory of the West was neither total nor final.

To the student of international relations, these events followed a pattern that has pervaded most of human history: the constant struggle of states for wealth and power. It is less a story of wicked imperialists and innocent victims—although there was no shortage of either—than it is a reminder that all states seek to expand their power and influence; that they perceive threats when other states do the same; and that conflict is as "natural" as peace.

Rising Powers: Japan and the United States

The most striking development of the last third of the nineteenth century was not the continued exaction of privileges by the West from its Asian victims, but rather the rapid recovery of Japan from the doldrums of the late Tokugawa years. It was Japan that forced Korea to open its doors and ultimately dominated that country. It was Japan that became China's great tormentor. And it was Japan that stopped the Western advance into East Asia, checking the Russian march into Korea and Manchuria in the early years of the twentieth century and intimidating Great Britain and the United States as well.

The power of Japan's central government, the Tokugawa shogunate, had been in decline before an American fleet arrived and "persuaded" the Japanese to sign their first treaty with the West. The influx of foreign diplomats and merchants that followed served as a catalyst for the overthrow of the Tokugawa. The government's response to the challenge of the West was deemed by most Japanese to have been inadequate, and many feared that Westerners would run rampant over Japan as in China. The perception of an external threat to the Japanese polity drove rival provincial forces into alliance against the shogunate. Together they defeated it in 1868 and carried out the nominal "restoration" of imperial power, uniting the country behind the symbol of the Meiji Emperor.

Japan's new leaders learned much about international relations from the West and were determined to join the ranks of the great powers. Toward this end they recognized the need for a strong central government and a strong military. Once they were able to defend themselves against the Americans and the Europeans, they would rid themselves of the unequal treaties imposed on them by the West and establish themselves as the dominant power in East Asia.

Qing leaders and the Chinese who worked with them also understood that to compete with the West, China had to modernize its military technology and accelerate industrialization. The absence of central direction proved fatal to the Qing self-strengthening program. Li Hongzhang, the most successful modernizing official, built an arsenal, an army and a navy, a steamship company and a railroad, a textile plant and a coal mine, but he, rather than the nation, was the principal beneficiary of his efforts. These assets increased his personal wealth and power greatly; they were not always available when needed elsewhere in China. In 1884, for example, when Qing forces attempted to block French advances in Vietnam, Li failed to come to their aid, preferring not to risk his own men and ships. China was forced by France to surrender its status as overlord of Vietnam. And just as Li was unmoved by the plight of those who fought the French, they remained on the sidelines as he struggled against the Japanese in the decade that followed.

Korea provided the principal arena in which the contest for primacy in East Asia was fought between China and Japan. Much of Korea's misfortune was geographically determined: its territory was easily accessible to larger and more powerful Asian neighbors and, following Russia's expansion to the Pacific, of interest to the tsar's officials as well. But Korea's internal affairs had much to do with its inability to organize effective resistance against those who would deny its independence.

Although a faction had emerged in Seoul that favored modernization and looked to Japan as an example, the predominant influence in Korea in the 1880s remained Chinese. It was Li Hongzhang who negotiated Korea's first treaty with the United States and persuaded the Koreans to accept it in 1880. The Qing still perceived Korea as their vassal, and Li hoped that a Western stake in Korea would forestall the expansion of Japanese influence. The Korean queen looked to China for support and was unsympathetic to Japanese-inspired change. A failed coup attempt in 1882 also appears to have been aimed at the reformers and their Japanese supporters.

In brief, the two principal factions in Korean politics had each compromised their country's independence by seeking foreign support. At this point, the Russians urged the court to look to them for protection as a means of breaking loose from Chinese control. Some Korean political figures even looked to the United States, hoping the Americans might help them pre-
serve their independence. Instead of mobilizing the support of their own people, Korean leaders turned frantically to one or another of the foreign contenders in their efforts to gain or retain power.

A rebellion in 1894 prompted the king to petition for Chinese help, but the Japanese quickly moved troops into Seoul. A few days later China and Japan declared war on each other. At last Li Hongzhang’s navy steamed into action, only to be destroyed by a Japanese fleet that was better trained, equipped, and commanded. In control of the seas, Japan reinforced its troops easily and drove the Chinese out of Korea. And the Japanese army did not stop at the Yalu but marched into Manchuria and on into the Shandong Peninsula. There was little to stop it from continuing to Beijing. The Qing were forced to sue for peace, and Li negotiated with the great Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi.

Ito demanded Chinese recognition of the independence of Korea; the cession of Taiwan, the Pescadores, and the strategically important Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria, China’s gateway to Korea; and in addition a huge indemnity and new commercial concessions. The Qing had no choice but to accept the terms offered. Most threatening to the Qing court was the loss of the Liaodong Peninsula, which would put the shadow of Japanese troops over Beijing. Fortunately for China, Russia had its own aspirations in the region and won French and German support for its demand that the peninsula be left in Chinese hands. Japan was not ready to challenge the Europeans and backed off, but the Japanese would not forget.

The debacle in Korea, the failure of China’s modern military forces, and the harshness of Japanese peace terms devastated the Qing court. It was apparent that self-strengthening had failed. Japan had exposed China’s weakness, and now the Europeans, especially the Russians, were eager for new territorial and commercial concessions. The Russians expected to be rewarded for helping China retain the Liaodong Peninsula. Others would demand comparable concessions. The Chinese empire was on the verge of dismemberment, the “slicing of the Chinese melon.” By the end of 1898, China was divided into spheres of influence, controlled by foreigners, filled with foreign officials, merchants, investors, and troops. Annexation of these spheres and the end of China’s existence as an independent state were only a step away.

Although their role had not been as important as that of Great Britain, Americans had been involved in East Asia from the moment of their nation’s conception. They had made their presence known in every port city of the region, dominating the carrying trade to China in the 1840s. They led the way in the opening and modernizing of Japan and were the first Westerners to obtain a treaty with Korea. Americans were everywhere, and their Asiatic Fleet indicated their government’s intention to protect its citizens and their interests; but the United States had claimed no territory as its colony and had no sphere of interest in East Asia at the time of Sino-Japanese War.

In the course of the American crusade to liberate Cuba in 1898, the United States, aided by Filipinos rebelling against Spanish imperialism, defeated Spain in the Philippines as well as in Cuba. Spain surrendered, and the U.S. government had two choices: it could leave the islands in the hands of the Filipinos, or it could replace Spain as the imperial power in the Philippines. It chose empire. America would rule the Philippines as Britain ruled India, France ruled Indochina, and Holland ruled Indonesia. Overcoming ferocious Filipino resistance, the United States became an imperialist power in Asia.

Among the reasons for the American decision to take the Philippines was fear in the business community that European and Japanese imperialists, as they carved their spheres of influence in China, would deny opportunities to Americans. Now the United States would have a foothold in the region, a position from which Americans could compete with others for the resources and markets of East Asia. As the historian Richard Leopold contended, “The desire for the Philippines and a concern for China became mutually supporting.”

Businessmen concerned with China remained uneasy, demanding more vigorous action by their government. Leading commentators on foreign affairs, including the navalist Alfred Thayer Mahan, wrote about the importance of East Asia in the world balance of power. To appease its critics, Washington issued its “Open Door notes” in 1899 and 1900. The United States asked those powers with spheres of influence in China not to discriminate against American trade within those spheres or interfere with the work of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, an important source of Qing income. The American notes also asked that China’s territorial integrity be preserved. It was a modest initiative designed to satisfy both businessmen who sought to expand their interests in China and romantic nationalists eager to see their country play a larger role in the world.

The United States was asking the other nations with interests in China to pursue a policy of self-denial in the areas under their control. In return for equal treatment for their exports, the Americans offered nothing. The
United States, however, was not challenging the existing spheres of influence, nor seeking to compete in railroad or mining development, crucial to the Russians and Japanese. There was nothing to be gained by rejecting the American request, and little to be lost by endorsing it with qualifications that protected the interests nearest to each nation. The various addressees replied evasively, but the American government pronounced itself satisfied.

Although John Hay, the American secretary of state, persuaded himself that his country had contributed to the preservation of the Chinese empire, no expression of gratitude came from Beijing. At the time the Open Door notes were formulated, relations between China and the United States were tense as a result of discriminatory practices against Chinese emigrants to the new American territories of Hawaii and the Philippines. Benevolent feelings toward China did not motivate Hay, nor did the Chinese have any illusions.

Japan's victory over China in 1895 and the American victory over Spain in 1898—and especially the imperial acquisitions of both victors—indicated the determination of Tokyo and Washington to join the competition for wealth and influence in the region. European dominance over East Asia was to prove short-lived, as the rising powers, Japan and the United States, began to assert themselves.

**Boxer Interlude**

The terms imposed on China by the Japanese after their victory in 1895 and the aggressive actions of the Western powers in the years that followed had a strikingly disruptive impact on coastal China. Foreigners overran the country, digging mines, building railroads and factories, treating the Chinese with contempt in their own land. Educated Chinese and others in the port cities understood that China was not faring well in the world competition for wealth, power, and status.

The years between 1895 and 1900 were years of intellectual and political ferment in China as scholars and officials struggled to find the means to preserve their country's independence and restore its historic grandeur. The dreams and schemes of reformers and revolutionaries came to naught. Unrest intensified, especially in north China, as the Chinese government found no way to check foreign intrusions. Into this void moved a crypto-nationalist movement, the "Boxers," to harass foreigners, especially missionaries, and native converts to Christianity.1 Eager to divert the Boxers from anti-dynastic activities, the Qing court supported them in their actions against for-

eigners with the modern arms of the imperial army. The result was war with Japan and the West in the summer of 1900, a war that China could not win and that ended in August with the occupation of Beijing by a foreign expeditionary force.

China's borders remained intact, but the Chinese were forced to pay an enormous indemnity to the victors. This indemnity, added to that exacted by the Japanese in 1895, put an extraordinary burden on Qing finances, greatly inhibiting the dynasty's ability to rule and retarding the country's effort to industrialize.2 In addition, China had to grant its conquerors the right to station troops between Beijing and the sea—new protection for foreigners in north China and new monuments to China's weakness.

**In the Light of the Rising Sun**

Russia posed the principal threat to China and the shaky balance of power that had emerged in East Asia in the last years of the nineteenth century. The Russians had exploited the unrest in China to move their forces into Manchuria. They were deeply involved in the internal affairs of Korea. In general, they left no doubt that they intended Russia to be the dominant power in East Asia.

Neither the Chinese nor the Koreans had the means to deny the Russians their objectives. The Americans and British were troubled by Russian actions, and opposed them diplomatically, but neither country imagined a vital interest in Korea or Manchuria. The Japanese, however, did perceive a threat to their security, as well as to their economic interests in the region. Japan's aspiration to join the great powers, to be treated as an equal, was also being challenged by Russian intransigence.

In 1901 the Japanese proposed joint action against Russia to the Americans, but the United States was unwilling to use force to achieve its goals in East Asia. The British, however, had concluded that their interests would be served best by an alliance with Japan, and in January 1902 the Japanese accepted Britain's offer. As an ally of Great Britain, Japan found that its leverage with the Russians and its world standing increased significantly.

Nonetheless, the Russians rejected a Japanese proposal for the division of spheres of influence, an offer of Manchuria for Korea. The Japanese broke off diplomatic relations in 1904 and attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. The Russians suffered a disastrous defeat. Their forces in East Asia were outnumbered and outgunned, and the logistical problems of moving rein-
forcements from Europe to the Pacific proved overwhelming. The beginnings of the revolution of 1905 further weakened the Russian war effort.

Fortunately for the Russians, the Japanese were having problems of their own, particularly a shortage of funds. Confronting a shortage of manpower as well, they asked the American president, Theodore Roosevelt, to broker a peace accord. Roosevelt’s initial delight over Japan’s military success, his contention that Japan was serving the ends of the United States, had given way to recognition that Japan might prove to be an even more formidable opponent of American interests in East Asia than Russia. The Western powers operating in the region would have important interests in Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa—“divided interests, divided cares.” Japan would focus on East Asia and have “but one care, one interest, one burden.” It would be good to end the war while Russian power remained sufficient to maintain a semblance of a balance of power in the region. The ensuing Treaty of Portsmouth gave Japan a de facto protectorate over Korea and a valuable sphere of influence in Manchuria. Its navy dominated the shores of northeast Asia. Conqueror of Russia, ally of Great Britain, it had increased its stature in the world enormously: Japan had become a great power.

It was evident to Asian and Western observers alike that Western domination of East Asia would not endure forever. The Japanese, struggling to rid themselves of the capitulations forced on them by the Americans and Europeans, had succeeded. In 1894 they had won revision of the unequal treaties, ended the extraterritorial privileges Westerners had enjoyed in Japan, and also gained important concessions on the road to tariff autonomy, achieved fully in 1911. They had the strongest army in East Asia and the most powerful navy in the Pacific. In the age of imperialism, in which Darwinian thought influenced the foreign policies of the world’s leaders, the Japanese had proven themselves to be competitive. They were the only Asian imperialists.

The Koreans had attempted to stay clear of the Russo-Japanese War, but the Japanese sent troops to seize Seoul and all points of strategic value on the peninsula. Korea became a Japanese protectorate. No country would come to Korea’s rescue. In 1905 Tokyo forced the Koreans to give Japan control over their foreign affairs and to accept a Japanese resident-general who would be de facto ruler of the country. The Japanese intended to remake Korea in their own image.

Enraged by the Koreans’ lack of gratitude and by the resistance move-
another to mistreat Japanese. Central to Roosevelt’s policy toward East Asia was his determination to avoid conflict with Japan. In 1908 the Japanese ambassador in Washington and the American secretary of state negotiated an agreement in which both sides affirmed their desire for friendly relations. The Japanese agreed to redirect emigration to the Asian mainland and explained that they no longer considered southern Manchuria part of China: it was the defensive bulwark of their continental empire. The Americans raised no objections; they accepted Japan’s dominant role on the continent.

Nationalist Challenges to Imperialism

In 1905, encouraged by Japanese success against Russia and angered by American mistreatment of Chinese immigrants, Chinese students organized an anti-American boycott, arguably the first sustained nationalist movement in Chinese history. Certainly the Chinese had ample reason to be outraged by American racism, but the organizers were concerned with larger issues than U.S. immigration policy: they sought to strike a blow for Chinese prestige. Lacking the military power necessary to strike at the imperialists, they harnessed the resources available, using an organized public opinion against that power least likely to respond with force.

Another major sign of burgeoning Chinese nationalism was the “rights recovery” movement, an effort to wrest control over the construction and operation of railroads from foreigners. The movement spread across the country between 1904 and 1907 and generated mass support. In terms of capturing control of railroad development, the movement failed, but as a school for nationalist organizers, it played an important role.

In 1911, to the surprise of the major powers with interests in China, the Qing dynasty was overthrown and a republic proclaimed. Although Japanese leaders were divided over the appropriate response, none of them favored the emergence of a strong China. The Japanese army in Manchuria immediately devised schemes for separating Manchuria and Mongolia from the rest of China. The Foreign Ministry and important business interests perceived opportunities for economic advantage in all of China by pursuing less overtly aggressive policies. Other Japanese imagined a revitalized China assisting Japan in riding Asia of Western imperialism.

The Americans, British, French, and Germans were concerned primarily with maintaining their privileges in China. They would work with anyone who would honor the treaty system they had imposed in the nineteenth century. The Russians saw an opportunity to weaken Chinese authority over Outer Mongolia—and did so. Otherwise, the Republic of China fared reasonably well. Japanese army plans for Manchuria and Inner Mongolia were aborted, and the Western powers withheld recognition only briefly.

The war that began in Europe in August 1914 had dramatic consequences for China. Suddenly the European powers were too busy to interfere in Chinese affairs. Unfortunately for China, Japan was not. Yet neither were the Americans, who perceived themselves as China’s champions. The confrontation between the rising Pacific powers, Japan, and the United States was approaching.

As allies of the British, the Japanese promptly overran German possessions in East Asia, including the German concession in Shandong. In January 1915 they went further, presenting China with their notorious Twenty-one Demands. China was to become a Japanese protectorate, to be exploited much as Japan had exploited Korea just before annexation. Clearly, Tokyo assumed that the war in Europe had left it with a free hand, and the Japanese were moving rapidly to capitalize on the opportunity.

Objections to the Japanese moves came from London and Washington. But the Japanese were well aware that the British could not oppose them in any significant way and that the Americans, given their limited interests in the region, were hardly likely to do more than express displeasure. For the moment, the fifth and most obnoxious group of demands was dropped, but the Chinese were forced to accept the others immediately.

In 1917 both the United States and China intervened in the world war on the side of the British and their allies. Approximately 100,000 Chinese laborers assisted British, French, and American forces in France, suffering several thousand casualties. When the war ended in 1918, Chinese diplomats went to the peace conference at Versailles with great hopes based on their country’s role in the war and the anti-imperialism explicit in the Fourteen Points enumerated as a basis for a lasting peace by the American president Woodrow Wilson. Wilson’s call for self-determination, presumably for all the world’s people, was the catalyst for much of the nationalist fervor in East Asia in 1919.

The Koreans exploded first. With the Japanese serving as unwitting tutors, traditional xenophobia had evolved into modern nationalism. Many Korean nationalists went into voluntary exile, in both China and the West. But the activities of the exiles had little impact on Japanese imperialism. Only slightly more effective were the freedom fighters operating out of
Manchuria and the Russian Maritime Provinces. But on March 3, 1919, Korean nationalists organized their first great act of resistance as approximately 2 million people across the country demonstrated for independence. Japanese troops opened fire on the participants and torched the schools and churches to which they fled for refuge. They killed nearly eight thousand people. Scores of thousands were injured or arrested. No Western government came to the rescue.

The Chinese dreamt of ridding themselves of all the symbols of their semicolonial status, but regaining control of the former German concession in Shandong was their minimal demand. At Versailles, however, the Chinese representatives learned that Japan had signed secret treaties with its European allies that bound them to support Tokyo’s claims. Wilson was China’s only hope—but, troubled by a Japanese threat to quit the peace conference rather than yield on Shandong, he abandoned his support for the Chinese position.

In China the decision at the peace conference to transfer control of Shandong to Japan prompted outrage. Beginning with a demonstration in Beijing on May 4, 1919, hundreds of thousands of students took to the streets throughout China, committing acts of violence against allegedly pro-Japanese members of the government and organizing a boycott of Japanese goods. They had become the ingredient necessary for the cementing of what the revolutionary leader and first president of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen, called China’s “loose sands” into a powerful nationalist force.

Conferences in Washington and Moscow

Tensions between Japan and the United States troubled leaders of both countries. They had succeeded in finessing the immigration issue and other problems caused by racism in America. The Japanese had outmaneuvered the Americans easily when Roosevelt’s successor attempted to reduce their influence in Manchuria by having Americans buy the Russian- and Japanese-controlled railways. Wilson’s apparent unfriendliness at the time of the Twenty-one Demands created anxiety in Tokyo, but the two governments papered over their differences in the Lansing-Ishii agreement of 1917. New issues, however, arose between them at Versailles, and before the end of 1919, these issues and new immigration problems generated a brief war scare. A banking consortium agreement in 1920, in which the United States implicitly accepted Japan’s sphere of interest in Manchuria, ended the crisis.

Both Japanese and American war planners recognized that their countries had many issues that divided them and might lead to military confrontation. In particular, the navies of the two countries watched each other very carefully. The Japanese were deeply concerned by the enormous growth of the U.S. Navy during the world war. The United States had emerged suddenly as the greatest naval power in the world, and its capacity to outstrip Japan in an arms race was all too obvious. Japanese leaders were also aware that their British allies could not be counted on against the Americans. The security of the empire was at stake.

Japanese naval building worried analysts in the United States. Agitation for disarmament was intensifying in postwar America. Its leaders concluded that the only way to provide for their nation’s security and satisfy the public clamor for disarmament was to reach agreement with Japan to end the incipient arms race. They understood that the arms race could not be separated from other issues, including the Anglo-Japanese alliance, Japanese imperialism in China, and the balance of power in East Asia. At the invitation of the United States, in 1921 the British, Chinese, Japanese, and five lesser European states joined the Americans at a major conference in Washington.

From the American vantage point the conference was a tremendous success. Rejecting a suggestion that they join the Anglo-Japanese alliance, the Americans succeeded in replacing it with a harmless four-power nonaggression pact in which they and the French joined the British and Japanese. More satisfying to the American public was a five-power treaty in which Italy joined the other four in an agreement to limit the size of their respective navies, thus checking the arms race. The naval agreement left Japan secure in its home isles while limiting the ability of the Japanese navy to conduct offensive operations in the eastern Pacific.

The conference then turned to the matter of China—of great power competition in the western Pacific and Chinese aspirations. Sentiment in the United States favored Chinese challenges to Japanese and European infringements on China’s sovereignty, and the Chinese and American delegations worked closely together, but the principal concern of American officials, like their Japanese and European counterparts, was protection of their interests in China. Ultimately, the participants in the conference agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of China, to allow the Chinese to unify and modernize their country in their own way and at their own pace. To Americans, this was the solution to coexisting with Japanese power in East
Asia. All the states with significant interests in the region—except Soviet Russia—were committed to peaceful competition without prejudice to the future of China.

The Chinese were less satisfied. At best the participants were promising no further encroachments on Chinese sovereignty. Most of the attributes of sovereignty that China had been forced to surrender over the previous eighty years had not been retrieved. To politically involved Chinese, the conference had served the ends of the imperialists but had done little for China. The point was underscored in Moscow, where representatives of Sun Yat-sen’s Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party attended a Comintern-sponsored “Congress of the Tolers of the Far East.”

The failure of communist revolutions in Europe had led Lenin and some of his colleagues to look to Asia as an arena in which their vision might succeed. Lenin sent Soviet agents to China to find worthy collaborators. Under pressure from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean radicals—and in the context of the Washington Conference, the Comintern convened its “Tolers of the Far East” meeting in January 1922. It was a way of asserting Soviet interest in any Pacific settlement—of reminding the powers that Russia also had interests in East Asia.

The Guomindang ‘Revolution’ and the Great Powers

The Soviet government had much to fear from a powerful anticommunist Japan on its border and much to gain from the emergence of a China strong enough to confront Japan. But after the death of Yuan Shihai in 1916, the Chinese state had disintegrated. Respect for the authority of the government in Beijing declined with distance from the city. Various military men became regional warlords, obstacles to a united China. Realizing that the nascent Communist Party had no power and little influence, the Russians ultimately chose to support Sun’s efforts to unite the country. In 1923 Sun and a Soviet representative announced that Russia would provide the Guomindang with aid. Arrangements were made to have the Guomindang form a coalition with the Chinese Communists. And in 1924 the Soviets further ingratiated themselves with Chinese nationalists by surrendering some of the privileges of the unequal treaties.

Lenin died early in 1924, and Sun’s death followed a year later, but the Guomindang-Soviet alliance held. Russian arms and advisers enabled Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), Sun’s principal military aide, to beat back attacks by nearby warlord armies. Well equipped, well led, and highly motivated, Jiang’s forces began to extend their control over south China. And then in May 1925 their cause received an unintended boost from the foreign community in Shanghai when demonstrators against Japanese imperialism were fired upon by British troops, killing an estimated dozen and wounding a score more. The incident led to a spontaneous outburst of anti-imperialist, antiforeign sentiment that spread from Shanghai through China’s cities and ultimately to the countryside—the “May Thirtieth Movement.” A few weeks later, as Guomindang and Communist organizers mobilized thousands of workers, peasants, students, and soldiers in antiforeign demonstrations and strikes in Guangzhou, British troops killed more than fifty marchers. These incidents greatly strengthened the Guomindang-Communist alliance, winning enormous support for its cause throughout the country.

As Jiang’s forces fought their way toward the Yangzi, they met with little foreign interference. The British, whose interests were greatest in the region and who had been targets of much of the antiforeign agitation, chose to come to terms with the Guomindang. In December 1926 they indicated a willingness to revise the unequal treaties. The Americans followed suit. The Japanese, concerned primarily with Manchuria, also acted with restraint. But a crisis arose when Chinese forces in Nanjing attacked foreigners and foreign property, including the American, British, and Japanese consulates. With over a hundred Western and Japanese warships in the region and thousands of foreign troops on hand, the threat of a major intervention to stop the Guomindang advance loomed.

On the same day that he received demands for reparations and punishment of the offenders from the foreign powers, Jiang ordered the arrest and massacre of hundreds of Communists and labor leaders in Shanghai. At a critical moment in his relations with Japan and the West, he perceived an urgent need to initiate maneuvers that ultimately enabled him to beat Stalin and decimate the Communists before they could eliminate him. Because of the timing, the foreign policy issue and the internal political issue became intertwined: too recalcitrant a response to the foreign powers might provoke intervention, and too conciliatory a response surely would result in charges that he had sold out to the imperialists.

The Japanese, who had the clearest understanding of the turmoil within the Guomindang, counseled patience. They believed that they could work with Jiang, that he would respond reasonably to their determination to pre-
serve their interests in China. Less enamored of Jiang, but lacking a feasible alternative, the Americans and British followed the Japanese lead. In March 1928 Jiang accepted American terms for settling the Nanjing Incident.

Suddenly, in May, Japanese troops clashed with Guomindang troops in Shandong, undermining the efforts of Japanese statesmen. When the government in Tokyo attempted to retrieve the situation by forcing the principal northern warlord to return to Manchuria, the Japanese army assassinated him in a vain effort to take complete control of the region. Neither military nor civilian authorities in Japan supported the efforts of the army in the field, but no Japanese leader was willing to accept Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria, precluding an understanding with Jiang.

Guomindang forces soon gained control of most of China, and diplomatic recognition followed. In July 1928 the United States signed a treaty granting tariff autonomy to China and constituting recognition of Jiang's Nanjing regime. By the end of the year, all of the major powers had recognized the new government and negotiated treaties granting it tariff autonomy. On October 10, 1928, the Guomindang government was formally proclaimed. A few months later the Guomindang flag was raised over Manchuria. China was at least nominally reunited under the leadership of Jiang Jieshi. The revolutionary vision of Sun Yat-sen had been realized, treaty revision had begun, and the era of imperialist domination of China might have ended.

**Crisis in Manchuria**

It was in Manchuria that Chinese hopes for an end to imperialism were dashed, and it was, of course, the Japanese who were responsible. Jiang was determined to drive the Soviets and Japanese out of China's northeastern provinces. An effort to seize the Soviet-controlled Chinese Eastern Railroad in 1929 provoked a strong military response, and the Chinese were forced to back off. They then focused their efforts against the Japanese.

No Japanese leader—and few knowledgeable Japanese—were willing to countenance the loss of Japan’s privileges in Manchuria. Japan's Kwantung army in Manchuria, disgusted by what it perceived as Tokyo's appeasement of Jiang, offered its own response to Chinese nationalism. On September 18, 1931, after setting off an explosion on the Japanese-owned and operated South Manchuria Railroad in order to allege Chinese provocation, Japanese troops began the conquest of the region. The age of Japanese militarism had dawned and with it a new threat to Western interests in East Asia. While it crushed nationalism in Korea and fought it in China, Japan asserted its claim to lead nationalist movements throughout the rest of Asia, promising to preserve the continent for Asians, to free it from Western influence.

Japan was the dominant power in East Asia in the 1930s, as it had been since the world war. Japanese military power, resorted to increasingly by Tokyo and its men in the field, dictated the international affairs of the region. Japanese leaders were determined to control the resources and territory they deemed essential to their nation's security. After they consolidated their hold on Manchuria, the Japanese gradually edged toward full-scale war with China. Jiang's government was unable to respond effectively, and it received minimal support from the outside world.

The major Western states—France, Great Britain, and the United States—were drowning in the depths of the Great Depression, desperately eager for the crisis in East Asia to pass without need for their involvement. The League of Nations, to which the United States did not belong, could not act without strong British leadership, which was not forthcoming. From the United States came admonishments, first gentle, then increasingly harsh, to no avail. Words would not stop the Japanese army, but the international community had nothing more to offer. The vision of a collective security regime, embodied in the League, evaporated as each of the great powers determined that its interests in Manchuria were not sufficient to justify the risk of war with Japan. In 1933 Japan withdrew from the League, underscoring the impotence of the organization.

For a brief time Jiang could find solace in the relationship he was developing with Germany. He had been pleased with German economic and military advisers with whom he had worked in the late 1920s, and in 1933 new ties were established with the Germany of Adolf Hitler. Several senior German military officers provided Jiang with valuable advice, and before long all of the major German corporations were operating in China, helping to modernize its infrastructure and industry. The Chinese navy and air force were remodeled along German lines, but the promised U-boats and the Messerschmitt and Stuka aircraft never arrived. The new self-strengthening movement was interrupted when Hitler decided to ally with Japan instead.

For its part, the Soviet Union was eager to strengthen China against Japan to enhance its own security, and Stalin concluded that no man had a better chance of unifying the country than the man who had outmaneuvered him in 1927. He helped free Jiang when he was seized by his own forces in the "Xi'an incident" of 1936, and Jiang grudgingly moved toward an accommo-
dation with the Communists in a united front against Japan. The willingness of Jiang, the Communist leader Mao Zedong, and disparate warlords to submerge the past and abandon their ambitions was minimal, but they could not stem the tide of patriotic fervor that was sweeping urban Chinese.

Few Japanese believed that a united China was in their interest, and the Communists were viewed by most Japanese with more loathing than the Guomindang. Several Japanese leaders, military as well as civilian, had long favored reaching a settlement with Jiang to preclude a Communist victory in China and to keep Soviet influence out of Asia. The possibility of a Guomindang-Communist unified front generated new anxieties. The Japanese army was a powder keg awaiting a spark. That came in July 1937.

War Comes to Asia

The Japanese government was not seeking war with China in 1937. Even the Army General Staff hoped to avoid any major confrontation with the Chinese. Nonetheless, minor skirmishes in the vicinity of Beijing in July escalated into full-scale warfare. Japanese officers in China were eager to strike, and the mood in China precluded further appeasement by Jiang. Seeking a rapid victory, the Japanese poured troops into China. World War II had begun in Asia.

The ensuing battle for control of the Yangzi Valley, from Shanghai to Nanjing, lasted nearly five months and cost the Chinese approximately 250,000 casualties. 60 percent of the men they had put into the field. In December the Japanese took Nanjing, where officers unleashed their troops for a two-month orgy of looting, rape, and murder— atrocities unsurpassed in the history of modern warfare—subsequently referred to as the Rape of Nanjing. China's best-trained and equipped forces had been decimated and its capital lost to the enemy. By its actions at Nanjing, the Japanese army wrecked mediation efforts by Hitler aimed at preventing the spread of communism in China.

Jiang had hoped for intervention by the League or the Americans, but as in 1931, little but words of comfort came from those quarters. The Europeans were focused on the activities of Hitler and Mussolini, much closer to home, and the Americans were wallowing in the profound neutralist and pacifist mood that had captured the country after the failure to stop Japan in Manchuria. Initially, only the Soviets, fearful of a Japanese attack on their Asian lands, provided significant aid.

In the late summer of 1937, however, Soviet support for China dropped sharply. After signing a nonaggression pact with Hitler's Germany in August, the Soviets were less concerned about having to fight a two-front war. During the week the pact was signed, Soviet and Mongolian troops repelled a Japanese attack on the border between Mongolia and Manchuria. In a counteroffensive they destroyed the Japanese force, Stalin concluded that he had little further need to keep the Chinese in the field.

The coming of war in Europe in September 1939 left the Chinese in desperate straits. The Soviets had turned their backs on China's plight, and the Americans now focused their attention on events across the Atlantic. Britain was fighting for its survival. China stood virtually alone, and the question was how long it would be before Jiang was forced to succumb to Japanese pressure. Against overwhelming odds, Jiang and his forces in Chongqing and Mao and his forces in and around Yan'an held out.

The Japanese increasingly looked southward, eager to exploit opportunities created by Hitler's pressures on Britain, France, and the Netherlands. In September 1940 they forced the French to allow Japanese forces to move into Indochina. A few days later they concluded the Tripartite Pact, the Axis Alliance, with Germany and Italy, intended to intimidate the United States by threatening a two-ocean war if the Americans intervened in either the European or Asian conflict. The signing of the pact was an event of enormous importance for Japan's relations with the United States—and, indirectly, of tremendous benefit to China. No words, no act, could have been more effective in convincing Americans of their stake in the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War than Japan's decision to ally with Nazi Germany.

In the months following the signing of the Tripartite Pact, the United States began supplying large-scale aid to China. In 1941 China also became eligible for lend-lease, the aid program originally designed to provide Great Britain with the means to defend itself—and many millions of dollars' worth of military equipment was allocated for China. At the same time, the United States began to apply economic sanctions against Japan, first cutting off the sale of scrap iron, then freezing Japan's assets in the United States in July 1941, and imposing a partial oil embargo in August.

American military leaders, unused to war and anxious to avoid a showdown with Japan, succeeded in getting President Franklin Roosevelt to authorize the licensing of some Japanese oil purchases. Although Roosevelt had rejected an appeal for a meeting with the Japanese prime minister in June, the United States agreed to negotiations aimed at reaching a modus vi-
vendi. Most American leaders were interested in reaching an understanding that would prevent war with Japan and allow them to concentrate on the war they considered more dangerous to the United States—the war in Europe.

Throughout the autumn of 1941, Japanese and American diplomats met in Washington. But as Japan’s oil reserves were consumed, time was running out. If the Americans would not provide the oil essential to Japan’s war machine, it would have to be found elsewhere—and soon. The American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor would have to be destroyed to preempt interference in Japan’s conquest of Southeast Asia and its control of Indonesian oil. The failure of diplomacy would necessitate war—and diplomacy failed.

Fear that Jiang would surrender if the United States appeased Japan stiffened the American negotiating position. The British, too, were apprehensive, and their prime minister, Winston Churchill, warned Roosevelt that a Chinese collapse would increase the danger to British and American interests in East Asia. In Washington and London there was also concern that a Japan freed from Chinese resistance would attack the Soviets, facilitating a Nazi victory as Hitler’s armies pounded Leningrad and Moscow.4

And so war came to America in the form of a brilliantly executed Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941, “a date,” Roosevelt told his countrymen, “which will live in infamy.” Japanese leaders had little expectation of defeating the United States, but they saw no alternative to war if Japan was to maintain the momentum of its imperial expansion. They anticipated dealing a blow to American naval power sufficient to buy the time to build an impregnable position in East Asia. As they planned construction of a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, they hoped the Americans would not be willing to pay the price of trying to take it away from them. It was a gamble the Japanese military was willing to take.

The Pacific War

Japan conquered Southeast Asia with remarkable speed in the six months following the attack on Pearl Harbor. But defeat of its fleet by the U.S. Navy in the Battle of Midway in June 1942 ended its offensive in the eastern Pacific. In the months that followed, Japan fought tenaciously to hold on to every inch of territory it had seized; but slowly the Americans brought their superior wealth and power to bear and pushed the Japanese back. Island by island. American submarines conducted a ruthless war against Japanese shipping. Tokyo was firebombed in March 1945, and it was only a matter of time before the Japanese military would be forced to admit defeat.

In May 1945, Germany surrendered. Japan was alone, and U.S. planes began a massive bombing offensive that finished off Japan’s navy and industrial base. But the Japanese gave no indication of their willingness to surrender. American leaders knew that victory over Japan was in reach. The questions that remained were when and at what cost. As Washington looked for a strategy with which to end the war, it concluded that Jiang, husbando his resources to fight the Chinese Communists, would not be much help. Roosevelt turned to the Soviet Union and, at Yalta in February 1945, won a pledge from Stalin to abrogate the Soviet-Japanese nonaggression pact and attack Japanese forces within three months of the end of the war in Europe. In return Roosevelt promised to gain Jiang’s agreement to restore tsarist privileges in Manchuria—a small price for the United States to pay.

In July 1945, after Roosevelt’s death and the surrender of Germany, Churchill, Stalin, and President Harry Truman met at Potsdam and issued a declaration calling on Japan to surrender and spelling out their terms. Akira Iriye, the leading historian of Japanese-American relations, has argued that “the Potsdam declaration should have been accepted immediately and unequivocally by the Japanese government, for it gave them what they were seeking, ‘a peace on the basis of something other than unconditional surrender.’”7 Committing possibly the greatest mistake in recorded history, the Japanese government delayed its decision, and, unintentionally, the prime minister indicated that Tokyo did not take the declaration seriously.

Assuming continued fierce Japanese resistance comparable to that encountered at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and determined to end the war quickly and at minimal cost in American lives, Truman ordered the air force to drop the first atomic bomb. On August 6, 1945, the people of Hiroshima were struck by the most horrible weapon mankind had ever devised.

Still the Japanese military refused to surrender. Two days later Soviet troops invaded Manchuria and overran the depleted Japanese army there. On August 9 a second atomic bomb obliterated Nagasaki—and still the Japanese military opposed surrender. It took five more days and the intervention of the emperor to move the Japanese government to accept the Allied peace terms. The war in Asia was over—and the stage was set for the next great confrontation in East Asia.
The Cold War in East Asia

In Washington, especially among American military leaders, apprehension emerged about Soviet intentions in Manchuria and Korea. Stalin clearly was determined to assert Soviet power in East Asia, and Roosevelt had conceded Soviet influence in Manchuria and claims to territories the Japanese had wrested from the tsar in 1905. But Roosevelt was dead, and some of his advisors thought he had conceded too much. The men who had crafted the victory over the Axis powers would not countenance a Soviet challenge to their perception of the security of the United States and its interests across the Pacific.

The disposition of forces at the end of the war allowed the United States to deny the Soviets—or any other nation—a meaningful role in the occupation of Japan. On the mainland, however, the situation was quite different. Soviet troops were dominant in the Northeast, and Stalin’s diplomats drove hard bargains in negotiations with the Chinese. Although the Soviets had been China’s principal supporters early in the war, Jiang had not hesitated to seize the opportunity to eliminate Soviet influence in Xinjiang when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. When the balance shifted in Stalin’s favor, he forced Jiang to accept the “independence” of Outer Mongolia—which had been in the Soviet orbit since the 1920s—and Soviet control over Manchurian railways and ports.

In Korea, Soviet troops did not take advantage of the late arrival of American forces but withdrew north of the thirty-eighth parallel, the point at which Soviet and American planners had agreed to divide their zones of occupation. Stalin was not ready for a confrontation with the United States. The Japanese were disarmed and expelled from north and south, but the Koreans, anticipating independence, found their country divided and occupied, the freedom promised in the victors’ Cairo Declaration of 1943 postponed. Throughout the country Koreans of all political persuasions staged demonstrations, almost unanimously outraged by the denial of their independence.

Increasingly, in the months following Japan’s surrender, the Soviet Union and the United States viewed each other as potential adversaries, with enormous ramifications for the peoples of East Asia. Koreans and Chinese began to look to one or the other of these great powers to achieve their own political ends, linking their own civil strife to the growing enmity between the Americans and the Soviets.\(^8\)

At the end of the war in Asia, the principal concern of the Americans, widely shared by their allies and Asians generally, was to eliminate Japan as a military threat. The men responsible for atrocities or deemed responsible for starting the war were tried as war criminals. Japan was stripped of its empire, and its military and civilian population overseas was repatriated. Its armed forces were demobilized. The Japanese were denied a centralized police force, which might take on a paramilitary character, and Japan’s arms industry was dismantled.

A second important American objective was the democratization of Japan. In practice that meant remaking Japan in America’s image—a New Deal for Japan. In 1946 the Japanese were forced to accept a constitution drafted primarily by the staff of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, General Douglas MacArthur. Most striking among its provisions, and in accord with the highest American priority, Article 9 required the Japanese to renounce war as an instrument of national policy and consequently the right to maintain military forces. The pacifism of this article was embraced by the Japanese people, perhaps more eagerly than any other reform imposed by their conquerors.

From 1948 to 1950 the Americans looked for a way to end the occupation, to return control of Japan to the Japanese before they became hostile to the American presence. American leaders were confident that the Japanese could be relied on to oppose communism and to work with the United States and its allies against the spread of Soviet influence. Washington was also eager to have the Japanese economy recover so that it would cease to be a drain on American resources. American policy planners saw Japan as central to an integrated regional economy, the “workshop” of Asia, the engine of Asian economic growth. A few went further and wanted to see Japan rearm so that it could defend itself and support the containment policy of the United States.\(^9\)

The Soviet Union was not eager to see a free and independent Japan resume its place in the world order. Japan alone had been a terrible threat to East Asia for half a century. The prospect of a powerful Japan allied with the United States could only produce nightmares in the capitals of the Soviets and their friends. Indeed, there were few Asians who wished to see Japan unfettered. Consequently, the Soviets refused to sign a peace treaty with Japan to end the occupation, and the Americans, lacking support from their friends, chose not to proceed unilaterally. Although the occupation continued, there was little doubt that the Japanese had regained de facto control of their domestic affairs by 1950.

In China at the end of the war, Jiang Jieshi confronted a serious problem:
the challenge of the Chinese Communists. He was determined to rid the country of Mao’s followers, but he realized that external forces, Soviet and American, might pose obstacles. He had outmaneuvered Stalin once, in the 1920s, and might succeed a second time. The Americans, his wartime allies, were almost as troublesome. Relations had soured during the war, and Jiang could not be certain of the course of the post-Roosevelt leadership in Washington.

Neither the Soviets nor the Americans had a clear plan for coping with the civil strife they anticipated in China. Mao had not been Stalin’s choice to lead the Chinese Communists, and he had purged the party of those most likely to be subservient to Moscow. He had demonstrated during the war that he would not sacrifice the interests of his forces to serve those of the Soviet Union.19 Jiang, by contrast, had conceded Stalin’s demands regarding Manchuria and Mongolia. Stalin preferred to work with the Communists, to envision a communist revolution sweeping Asia, but he was not prepared to sacrifice the gains he had won from Jiang on behalf of a prickly, uncontrollable Mao. Stalin’s ambivalence was reflected in Soviet actions immediately following Japan’s surrender. Very early, Mao confessed to party cadres that “Soviet policy cannot be understood.”11

American policy was similarly muddled, largely because policy makers were contemptuous of Jiang and suspicious of Mao. Leaning toward support of Jiang despite wartime criticism of his repressive government, the Americans tried to mediate between the competing parties to prevent a civil war. They hoped that “moderates” in both parties would create a centrist regime, unsullied by the fascist tendencies they saw in Jiang’s Guomindang or the threat of pro-Soviet communist totalitarianism they perceived in a Maoist government.

From mid-1946 through mid-1949, a civil war raged in China. The Americans and Soviets watched each other carefully, but neither side sent in its own forces. The Americans disengaged gradually, but continued to provide Jiang’s government with a modicum of support. The Soviets gave the Chinese Communists access to surrendered Japanese weapons, but held back until it was apparent that the Communists would win with or without their support. In effect, the two great powers deterred each other, and neither considered the outcome of the battle of vital importance to its own security—so long as the other stayed out. In the context of the emerging cold war, the Americans were relieved to see the Soviets withdraw from China and gambled on Chinese nationalism to keep a Maoist China from becoming an “adjunct of Soviet power.”12 The Soviets were equally relieved when the United States chose not to intervene to rescue Jiang from defeat. When the end was in sight, both Washington and Moscow sought ways to reach accommodation with the incoming regime, which was beholden to neither of them.

As a committed Marxist-Leninist, Mao had no reservations about aligning his country with the Soviet Union in its confrontation with the Americans. In June 1949 he publicly denounced the United States and declared that China would lean to the side of the Soviets. But Mao and Zhou Enlai, his principal aide and diplomatist, were very much aware that the United States was better able than the Soviet Union to provide the assistance they needed for the reconstruction and modernization of China. As Chinese patriots, they were unwilling to become dependent on Stalin. If the Americans would refrain from further interference in China’s internal affairs and treat China with respect, as an equal, Mao and Zhou might be receptive to overtures from Washington.

American leaders were divided over the possibility of a useful working relationship with the People’s Republic of China, but Dean Acheson, the secretary of state who dominated the policy process in 1949, was clearly receptive to the idea. He despised communism and led his country’s preparations for conflict with the Soviet Union, but he also despised Jiang. He was intrigued by the argument that China’s Communists might be kept from becoming an instrument of Soviet policy. Domestic political considerations handicapped his efforts, but he kept the door open until catastrophe in Korea slammed it shut late in 1950.13

Stalin was conscious of the attraction of American wealth and power to some Chinese leaders. He had no intention of supporting a regime that might play him off against the Americans. Unable to install a more malleable leader, he kept Mao at arm’s length until assured he could count on Chinese support in any conflict with the United States. Mao and his comrades had a simple choice: commit themselves to the Soviet Union and gain Soviet support against any external threat, or gamble on the goodwill of the avowedly anticomunist government in Washington. They chose Moscow.

When Stalin finally agreed to receive Mao in December 1949, the ensuing negotiations were difficult and demeaning for Mao. After two months, Mao gained the alliance that would protect him from the Americans and their new Japanese friends without surrendering China’s independence. In return he was forced to concede the loss of Mongolia and to leave Manchu-
rian ports in Soviet hands until 1952. The ideological bonds between Stalin and Mao scarcely intruded on each man's relentless pursuit of his nation's interests.

The Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950 upset Acheson's plans for reaching an accommodation with the People's Republic, but the Americans still intended to extricate themselves from the Chinese civil war by abandoning the rump regime Jiang had established on Taiwan. They anticipated the Communist takeover of Taiwan in the summer of 1950 and assumed that recognition of Mao's government would follow soon afterward. No one in Washington expected friendly relations with Beijing, but Acheson was persuaded that a working relationship was possible. Eventually, he predicted, Soviet imperialism would drive the two Communist states apart. The United States wanted to be in position to drive home the wedge.

One signal the Americans sent Mao came in their announcement of a 'defensive perimeter' in the Pacific which excluded Taiwan. American leaders indicated publicly that Taiwan was not essential to the security of the United States. But the defensive perimeter proclaimed by the Americans also excluded the entire Asian mainland. raising questions about how the United States might respond to an attack on the intensely anticommmunist Republic of Korea (ROK), which had been established south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Acheson declared that the South Koreans would have to defend themselves or turn to the UN.

In Korea, the mutually hostile regimes that had emerged on the peninsula in 1948 were at each other's throats, each eager to attack the other and unify the country under its own control. From the end of 1948 to June 1950, there were constant cross-border skirmishes initiated by both sides. Several times in 1949, Kim Il Sung, leader of the Communist North, begged Stalin to give him the means to attack the South. Stalin demurred, apprehensive about provoking a confrontation with the United States. The Americans denied the southern regime the offensive capability it desired. But in the spring of 1950, noting the withdrawal of American troops from Korea and the fact that Korea was outside the announced defensive perimeter of the United States, Stalin decided to give the northern Communist regime the supplies and military advisers it needed to overrun the South.

With the approval and support of Mao Zedong, Kim prepared a massive invasion of the South. Kim was confident that he could gain control of all of Korea quickly, before the Americans could muster a response. Stalin, with so many signals of a lack of American interest in Korea, bet there would be no response; he gave Kim the green light to attack. They were wrong, and the world, most especially the Korean people, paid a terrible price for their miscalculations.

On June 25, 1950, Korean Communist forces swept across the thirty-eighth parallel and quickly threw back the outnumbered and less well equipped southern army. But to the dismay of Kim, Stalin, and Mao, and despite its decision to place Korea outside its defensive perimeter, the United States chose to come to the aid of the ROK. American leaders perceived a direct threat to Japan and to the credibility of the United States as a defender of its friends. Remembering the failure of the League to stop Japan in Manchuria in 1931, they were determined to see the UN succeed. The League's inaction had been followed by further aggression and World War II. Never again. If Stalin was testing the will of the United States to resist Soviet expansion, the Americans accepted the challenge.

Most of those who fought against Kim's armies were Koreans or Americans, but fifteen other members of the UN also sent troops, most notably the British and the Turks. Together they beat back North Korean attacks and launched a successful counteroffensive in mid-September, driving the northerners back across the thirty-eighth parallel in less than a month. Kim's government now faced the possibility of complete destruction.

The Chinese were apprehensive. If the Americans rolled back the North Koreans and eliminated the Communist state on China's border, they might continue their offensive into Manchuria. They might then attempt to overthrow the Communist government of China and return Jiang to the mainland. The Americans had already ordered ships to the Taiwan Strait to prevent Mao's men from attacking Taiwan. Profoundly concerned, Chinese leaders warned the Americans that if UN forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into North Korea, China would intervene against them.

Contemptuous of Chinese power and eager for an opportunity to demonstrate that they could reverse the spread of communism that once seemed to threaten all of Asia, American leaders ordered their troops across the thirty-eighth parallel. The plan was to annihilate North Korean forces and unite all of Korea under a noncommunist government. But they underestimated Mao.

Mao was convinced that China would have to fight the United States eventually, and he preferred to fight the Americans in Korea rather than on his own soil. A grateful Stalin offered air support, then withdrew the offer, fearful of provoking the United States. Nonetheless, Mao sent Chinese "vol-
unteers" across the Yalu into Korea. Eventually Soviet air support did arrive surreptitiously. Chinese troops quickly drove UN forces back down the peninsula, across the thirty-eighth parallel, reeling back to Pusan in defeat. China had taught the United States an important lesson.

Eventually, the Americans and their allies drove the overextended Chinese back across the thirty-eighth parallel. In July 1951 both sides reluctantly accepted a truce that brought the border between northern and southern regimes close to where it had been before the war started. It took two years of acrimonious negotiations and occasional fighting before an armistice agreement was reached in 1953. Even then a peace treaty proved elusive.

The Chinese had demonstrated to the world that they could not be ignored. Their intervention prevented the unification of Korea under a government likely to be hostile to them. But the price of Chinese intervention was high. Chinese casualties are estimated at over 800,000. For decades the Chinese and the Soviets argued bitterly over the $2 billion bill the Soviets presented Beijing for the aid they gave to China's military. And the Americans reentered the Chinese civil war, reenlisting on the side of Jiang's rump regime, and preventing Beijing from sending its forces to conquer Taiwan.

The confrontation between China and the United States ended American efforts to reach an accommodation with Beijing. As Chinese killed Americans in Korea, a hostile American public perceived China as a rogue state, a dangerous aggressor for whom there was no place in the UN and with whom the United States should not have diplomatic relations. The Americans continued to recognize Jiang's government on Taiwan as the legitimate government of all China. Jiang was clearly the principal beneficiary of the American and Chinese interventions in the war between the rival Korean states.

The Japanese also gained significantly from the war. Most of the goods and services required by UN forces in Korea were procured in Japan, providing an enormous stimulus to the Japanese economy. Japanese minesweepers, part of a growing "defense" establishment of dubious constitutionality, cleared Japanese waters. In return they would be shielded by the American "nuclear umbrella."

After the Korean War, the central tension in the cold war in East Asia was between the United States and China. The principal flash point was the Taiwan Strait. The Americans stationed warships in the strait for nearly two decades after the Korean War. American aid to the Guomindang on Taiwan resumed, much of it military. Twice, in 1954 and again in 1958, Mao provoked confrontations by ordering attacks on Guomindang-held islands off the coast of China. On both occasions the United States intervened and forced him to back down. In 1954 the Americans signed a mutual defense pact with Jiang. Mao's efforts, however, were not rewarded. In the United States and in the capitals of its allies there was widespread unease with the prospect of a major war over a handful of tiny islands of no strategic value. American leaders were compelled to mute their belligerent rhetoric and negotiate with the People's Republic. In 1958 they forced Jiang to announce that his mission of ending Communist rule of the mainland would not require the use of force. Mao had succeeded in creating tension between Taipei and Washington and in increasing doubts about American policy toward China among its Western allies.

A major additional side effect of the strait crisis of 1958 was an intensification of the discontent that had been growing in the Sino-Soviet relationship. The Chinese were still angry over Soviet looting of Manchuria after World War II and the terms of Soviet economic and technical assistance. A Soviet offer of military advisers and requests for submarine basing rights and a radio station on Chinese soil to broadcast to Soviet submarines aroused Mao's suspicions. In the late 1950s Soviet foreign policy struck Chinese leaders as excessively cautious; nor were they pleased by Soviet domestic policies such as de-Stalinization. Worst of all, Soviet advice to avoid provoking the United States irritated Mao. The Soviet failure to support their operations against Taiwan led the Chinese to suspect Soviet indifference to China's interests. The ultimate indignity was the suggestion by Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, that Mao accept the two-Chinas policy toward which the United States had moved—in other words, surrender Taiwan in return for American recognition of the People's Republic. Angry exchanges, focused primarily on ideological differences, led to the recall of Soviet technicians from China in 1960 and an unsuccessful Soviet effort to sabotage China's nuclear weapons program. In the years that followed, relations became increasingly hostile.
As Mao and Khrushchev drove each other and their countries apart with harsh rhetoric, China was rent internally by divisions within the Communist Party, especially over issues such as the pace of agricultural and industrial change and the value of intellectuals to the state. The “Hundred Flowers” and “Great Leap Forward” campaigns of the late 1950s were followed by the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” that exploded in the mid-1960s. The Cultural Revolution brought China’s economic development to a halt and damaged the reputation it had won in world affairs since 1949. And despite the tenuous position of China in an international system in which it had succeeded in antagonizing both superpowers, the country’s foreign policy apparatus was destroyed and all but one of China’s ambassadors was recalled from abroad.

In 1968 a warning bell sounded for any Chinese leader concerned about national security. Soviet military intervention crushed a heretical reform movement in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Shortly afterward, the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, pronounced the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” claiming the right to use force in defense of Moscow’s conception of socialism. As the Soviets proceeded to mass troops along their borders with China in Xinjiang and Manchuria, tensions increased.

In March 1969 clashes between Soviet and Chinese patrols in the vicinity of Chenbao Island in the Ussuri River between Manchuria and Siberia resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. After the Chinese rejected Moscow’s demand for negotiations, Soviet forces marched into Xinjiang in August. Fearful of a preemptive strike against their nuclear installations in the region, the Chinese agreed to meet with the Soviets, defusing the crisis but doing little to improve Sino-Soviet relations.

Mao was persuaded that the Soviet threat was serious and became receptive to the idea that accommodation with the United States might be useful to counter Soviet pressure. The Americans, shaken by their battering in Vietnam in the late 1960s, began to perceive the Chinese as potential allies against the Soviets and as a source of support for their efforts to extricate themselves from the war in Vietnam. Each side moved cautiously, aware of opposition to rapprochement in both countries. As had been the case in the 1950s, Taiwan was the irresolvable issue. In 1971, however, the Americans and Chinese found compelling reasons to compromise. The winning formula was “one China, but not now.” The Americans acknowledged the fact that Chinese on both sides of the strait insisted on one China and expressed their expectation that the future of Taiwan would be determined peacefully, by the Chinese themselves, at some later time. In 1971 the United States supported the seating of representatives of the People’s Republic in the UN. Gradually the Americans moved to disengage themselves from Taiwan, to which they were bound by the mutual defense treaty of 1954.

By the mid-1970s, China and the United States had clearly ceased to be adversaries. The leaders of both countries had concluded that cooperation against the Soviet Union was of greater immediate importance than the many issues that still divided them. The cold war in East Asia was virtually over as the United States accepted defeat in Vietnam and began to pull back from the peak of its military involvement in the region. It remained, however, the dominant power there, retaining overwhelming naval superiority in the western Pacific and bases in Japan and Korea. Most East Asian leaders welcomed the American presence as a source of stability, a means both of containing communism and of preventing a revival of Japanese power.

The Resurgence of East Asian Economic Power

The cold war was not the only activity in East Asia in the years between the Communist victory in China’s civil war and the moment when the Americans finally recognized the People’s Republic. These were also years of extraordinary economic activity. Japan led the way with an astonishing burst of growth that took it from dependency on the largess of the United States to becoming one of the world’s largest economies and Washington’s most feared commercial rival. The Japanese were not alone. South Korea reluctantly came to terms with its former tormentor and used both Japanese capital and the Japanese development model to launch its own highly successful industrialization. Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, all primarily ethnic Chinese entities, outperformed many larger states, including the People’s Republic of China. By 1977, America’s trade across the Pacific had surpassed that with its traditional partners across the Atlantic. The economic importance of East Asia had increased enormously. It promised to be central to the international economic system, as it had been before the nineteenth century.

Coping with the United States remained Japan’s most important and most difficult challenge. No other country could equal American military power or provide a comparable market for Japanese exports. But the Americans had come to regret their efforts to prevent the rearmament of Japan and pressed constantly for the Japanese to rebuild their military for integration
into the forces defending the "Free World" against the "international Communist conspiracy." The Japanese parried these thrusts easily, pointing to the limitations of the constitution the Americans had imposed on them and domestic political opposition to revising the relevant provision. The Japanese had the weaker hand, but they played it very well.

Japan's leaders understood the importance of their American connection. In the context of the cold war, it was sensible to be aligned with the United States, to let Americans fight Japan's battles. Equally important was the market for Japanese goods provided by the United States and the easy access Americans gave Japan to the world's most advanced technology. It was an era in which the economy of the United States and support to America's friends provided an extremely high rate of world economic growth, a climate favorable to Japanese exports. As a result of shrewd industrial policy, Japan's growth rate soared.

By the 1960s, concern about Japan's becoming a financial burden to the American taxpayer gave way to fear of Japan as a commercial threat. By 1968 Japan had overtaken Germany to rejoice in having the second-largest economy in the world. Before long, some Japanese would dream of overtaking the United States, of Japan as number one. It was not an outcome Americans were prepared to countenance, nor was Japan's economic power a comfort to the neighbors it had once attempted to dominate.

Friction over trade issues began to trouble relations between Washington and Tokyo. To most American leaders, the political-military considerations of the cold war greatly outweighed trade matters, but in the 1960s complaints from domestic industries hurt by Japanese competition could no longer be ignored. Added to these irritations was Japan's unhappiness with America's war in Vietnam. Particularly irksome was the use of Okinawa as a staging ground for the American assault on North Vietnam in the late 1960s. The Japanese demanded the return of Okinawa, but the American military would not surrender its bases there. The territorial question soon became enmeshed in disagreements over trade.

In 1969 the Americans offered to return Okinawa in exchange for a Japanese agreement to limit textile exports to the United States. The Japanese prime minister, Sato Eisaku, accepted President Richard Nixon's offer and agreed to allow the United States to maintain bases on Okinawa and to reintroduce nuclear weapons in an emergency. Nixon thought Sato had promised also to limit textile exports. Both sides were delighted with the handling of Okinawa's reversion, but the textile settlement quickly collapsed. For over a year tense negotiations between the two countries embittered their relations. In the summer of 1971 came what the Japanese called the "Nixon shocks."

In July 1971 Nixon dramatically informed the world that his national security adviser had visited Beijing secretly and that the United States was proceeding toward rapprochement with China. The Japanese were given less than one hour's notice of this remarkable shift in American policy, although every advocate of rapprochement in the American government had underscored the importance of keeping Tokyo informed.15 Nixon had taken his revenge on Sato, who, faithful to his American ally, had long resisted popular demands for accommodation with China. This was shock number one.

In August Nixon struck again, imposing a surcharge on all U.S. tariffs in an effort to improve the trade balance. He began a process that ultimately forced the revaluation of the yen upward against the dollar, a de facto devaluation of the U.S. dollar to make American goods more competitive. Washington had sent Tokyo a clear message: it would no longer subordinate its economic interests to its foreign policy objectives.

The Nixon shocks changed the nature of the Japanese-American relationship. The Japanese could no longer count on benign neglect in Washington's response to Japan's commercial expansion. And if anger over trade issues frayed the alliance, could Americans newly enamored of China be relied on to provide for Japan's security? To some Japanese leaders it was evident that the United States was turning to China for insurance against the growing power of Japan. Japan would have to fend for itself in the international arena.

In fact, Japanese-American relations, though frequently ruled by economic issues, remained reasonably constant. The Japanese could not easily find a substitute for the American market or a cheaper source of protection. Few Americans were prepared to contemplate a hostile Japan, however useful rapprochement with China might be for America's confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The Japanese model was followed with relative ease by South Korea. In the colonial era, Japan had viewed Korea as an integral part of its economic system and had laid the foundations for a modern industrial infrastructure on the peninsula—although most of the industry was in the north. The Japanese had also created institutions, similar to their own, approximating what Chalmers Johnson and others have called the developmental state, a bureaucratically run regime focused on economic growth. Virtually all Ko-
orean officials and businessmen spoke Japanese and had contacts in Japan that proved enormously valuable after 1965, when Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship forced the people of South Korea to swallow a treaty of normalization with Japan.

Park was determined to build a wealthy and powerful nation. Economic development was his mission, and foreign-educated Korean technocrats and American advisers helped him refine and implement his ideas. Korea’s development would have to be export-driven, given the relatively small size of the domestic market. Its comparative advantage lay with its well-disciplined, low-wage work force, kept in line by Park’s troops and the dreaded Korean CIA. By 1981, Korea’s exports had soared from $42 million in 1962 to an incredible $20 billion. Its construction industry, having demonstrated its excellence in Vietnam, won most of the contracts for projects in the oil-rich Middle Eastern states. Park had driven South Korea into the front ranks of the world’s economic powers.

Park’s assassination in 1979 was followed by another military coup, headed by a general who lacked Park’s intelligence and reputation for rectitude. He and the general who succeeded him succumbed to corruption, and neither could carry out the adjustments required by the changing international economic climate. A bailout by the Japanese in 1983 facilitated recovery from the doldrums that struck immediately after Park’s death, but Korea was forced to open its markets as a price for Japanese and other foreign assistance. Brutal repression of an uprising in the less prosperous southern city of Kwangju radicalized students and workers, many of whom believed that the American military in Korea, linked closely to the American troops sent to Kwangju, was complicit in the death of thousands of demonstrators.

Korea was rescued from the vicissitudes of the 1980s by a combination of middle-class anger, American pressure, and the example of “People’s Power” overthrowing dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986. The military chose to accept political reform and elections in the late 1980s, but the nascent South Korean democracy, though an important force in the world economic system, was not free of its core problems, not least among them the security threat from the North.

Taiwan, arguably, had been the greatest beneficiary of the Korean War—and especially of Chinese intervention in that war. Japan’s economy had benefited greatly from American procurement policies, but the very survival of the regime on Taiwan derived from the change in American policy: the rapid reversal of Washington’s decision to abandon the island to the Commu-

munists. American economic and military assistance to Taiwan resumed, and American industrial goods, factories, and equipment flowed there in the 1950s and early 1960s. Once it became clear that Taiwan had become an American protectorate, Japanese and American companies seeking low-priced goods arrived to buy whatever Taiwan could produce. Jiang’s technocrats concluded that export promotion was the answer to Taiwan’s needs. Like the Japanese, they concentrated on achieving rapid economic growth, adjusting the island’s productive structure in relation to the opportunities they saw in the international economy. Slowly they shifted the focus of planning from Jiang’s dream of recovering the mainland to creating a solid base for a de facto independent Taiwan. Between 1959 and 1965, when American economic assistance began to be phased out, Taiwan’s foreign trade increased at a phenomenal rate.

In the mid-1960s, partly in response to American pressures, Taiwan moved away from state-owned enterprises to private enterprise and allowed direct foreign investment. Multinational corporations seeking cheap labor flocked to the island, producing goods there for export. Taiwan created the world’s first export-processing zone in 1966. An enormous flow of private foreign investment followed, with funds coming from the United States, overseas Chinese everywhere, Japan, and western Europe.

The 1970s required some painful adjustments. First came the shock of Chinese-American rapprochement and the fear of abandonment and isolation that accompanied it. Then came a huge increase in world oil prices and a worldwide recession in 1973. Several major U.S. corporations, forced by Beijing to choose between doing business on the mainland or on Taiwan, chose the larger potential of continental China. And finally came trade tensions with the United States, beginning in 1977.

Shrewdly, Taiwan’s leaders invited some of the world’s leading multinationals to operate on the island under concessionary conditions, giving other countries and influential companies a stake in its future. Its lobbyists in Washington, second only to the Israelis in sophistication and accomplishment, protected Taiwan’s interests. And to cut production costs, its industries began to move to Southeast Asia to take advantage of cheaper labor there. By 1979 tiny Taiwan was the twenty-first-largest trading country in the world, and it soon was second only to Japan in the amassing of foreign currency.

In the years that followed, despite losing its seat in the UN and its mutual defense pact and official relations with the United States, Taiwan continued
country in the world. Despite continued low per capita income, the gross national product of China’s billion-plus people overtook that of Germany, placing China third behind the United States and Japan. Many analysts predicted it would have the world’s largest economy in the twenty-first century. Its trade surplus with the United States also grew rapidly, creating a new source of friction between the two countries.

Clearly, as the world entered the last decade of the twentieth century, the economies of East Asia had regained an importance lost centuries before, when the West industrialized and they did not. Militarily, China alone seemed likely to emerge as a great power in the foreseeable future—although Japan certainly had the necessary wealth and industrial base. Korea and Taiwan were already major players. Before the twenty-first century was over, East Asia seemed likely to regain its place as the locus of the world’s economic power.

**On the Eve of the Next Millennium**

The men and women who lived through the last years of the twentieth century witnessed one of the major events in world history—the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet empire. They were also witnesses to one of the great triumphs of the human will—the election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa, marking an end to the apartheid regime that had shamed that nation. Only one event in East Asia was of comparable iconic import—the Tiananmen massacre, the brutal suppression of the democracy movement in China in 1989.

For the peoples of East Asia there were other events of unusual, even extraordinary significance. South Korea and Taiwan both emerged as stable democracies. In 1994 a war between an impoverished but possibly nuclear North Korea and the United States was narrowly averted. Attempting to intimidate Taiwan, China provoked a confrontation with the United States in 1996. The people of Hong Kong, many profoundly troubled by the events at Tiananmen, watched as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) marched into their city and China resumed sovereignty over it in 1997. And before the century ended, the economic miracles of East Asia began to unravel as currencies tumbled, banks failed, stock and real estate values fell, and unemployment rose. The stability of some of the region’s regimes seemed less certain as the legitimacy that came with prosperity was threatened. Of gravest concern was the possibility of East Asia’s economic troubles resulting in a
worldwide depression. The price of globalization could prove to be very high for all concerned.

The expectation that the future would belong to East Asia, that the locus of power was returning to where it had been before the brief era of Western dominance, had to be reconsidered. It was, of course, entirely possible that at the next turn of the business cycle, the Asian dragons, big and little, would surge forward and dominate international trade. It was conceivable that the shaky Chinese banking system would be repaired in time to allow the continued rise of China’s economic and military strength, as well as its political influence. One might even assume that eventually a strong, competent Japanese government would emerge and revitalize that nation, whose economy was in the doldrums for most of the 1990s—and whose well-being is so critical to the region. But the mood in the region was less confident in 1999 than it had been in 1990.

A striking feature of the 1990s, of enormous significance for East Asia, was the resurgence of the American economy. It had been clear throughout the decade that all of the states that feared China—or Japan, or North Korea—perceived the presence of American military power as a source of security. Before century’s end, the United States was again being pressed into the role of economic hegemon, at the very least as the market of last resort.

China, however, was increasingly dissatisfied with American preeminence in the region. American support for Taiwan posed a major obstacle to Beijing’s hopes for reunification. The United States retained sanctions against China for its transgressions at Tiananmen long after all the other major industrial states had resumed business as usual, and constantly criticized China’s human rights abuses. Some Chinese leaders argued that the United States was seeking to “contain” China, to prevent it from taking its rightful place among the world’s great powers, its rightful place as the dominant power in East Asia. And China was too big, too powerful, for the United States to dictate the terms of contact.

Before the decade ended, the United States and China backed away from their confrontation in the Taiwan Strait and groped clumsily toward what they called a “strategic partnership.” However vague the term, it was vastly superior to the moment in 1996 when the Chinese found it necessary to remind Americans that the PLA had missiles that could destroy Los Angeles. But tensions eased by an exchange of presidential visits in 1997 and 1998 flared again in May 1999 when American planes, bombing Belgrade as part

of NATO’s effort to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, mistakenly destroyed the Chinese embassy in the Yugoslav capital. In retaliation, the Chinese government encouraged violent demonstrations against the American embassy in Beijing. The episode, combined with American concerns about Chinese spying in the United States, threatened to derail efforts in both Washington and Beijing to cooperate on issues of vital concern to both countries.

At this point, in July 1999, Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan’s democratically elected president, roiled the waters further by announcing that henceforth relations between Taibei and Beijing would have to be conducted on a “special state-to-state” basis. “Clarifications” issued by his aides suggested that Taiwan would no longer accept the one-China formulation to which Taiwan, China, and the United States had adhered since the early 1970s. Neither Lee’s remarks nor those of his aides constituted a declaration of independence, but they outraged Chinese leaders determined to bring Taiwan under China’s control. In the weeks and months that followed, Washington worked frenetically to prevent violence in the strait, assuring Beijing of continued American commitment to the one-China principle and simultaneously attempting to persuade Lee to soften his remarks. Throughout the episode, Bill Clinton, the American president, had to be wary of a Congress eager to support democratic Taiwan and mistrustful of the People’s Republic.

At least as volatile as the Taiwan Strait standoff between Beijing and Taibei is the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The rapid economic decline of the Communist regime since the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 and the persistence of famine in the country suggest that the condition of Pyongyang is terminal. Yet its military forces remain powerful, and its missile and nuclear technology pose an increasing risk to all the states of the region—and conceivably to the United States as well. No one can predict the peaceful reunification of Korea with any confidence or be sure that the Communists will go quietly into the night. Nor can anyone be certain that the great powers—China, Japan, and the United States—will manage Korean affairs wisely.

Though hardly a passive or inconsequential participant in the affairs of the region, Japan is the nation least likely to disrupt the existing fragile international structure. Japanese leaders continue to rely on the United States for their country’s security, having drawn a step closer with the new U.S.-Japan security guidelines agreed upon in 1997. At the same time, they are loath to give offense to their Chinese neighbors. Economically, Japan remains dominant in East Asia, and it has the human and industrial potential with which
to compete with the United States worldwide. At least one analyst, the historian Walter LaFeber, sees renewed confrontation between Japan and the United States as likely. Most observers, however, are more sanguine.

The struggle for wealth and power in East Asia continues, with Chinese-American relations likely to remain central. The importance of avoiding a cold war between China and the United States is obvious. Should the world be spared that calamity, the answer to the related question of whether China will be a responsible member of the international community or attempt to use its growing power to maximize its own position, ultimately destabilizing the region, is likely to define the twenty-first century in East Asia.

Selected Readings


For Korean affairs, see Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997). Both books are also useful for the American role in Korea.

