CHAPTER 4

A Vision without a Plan: FDR’s Wartime China Policies

Introduction

During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt developed a vision for the post-war world. He thought he understood what was needed to ensure a lasting peace between the great powers and wanted to change the international system to achieve that peace.\(^1\) Central to this vision was the international organization that became the United Nations Organization (UNO). By creating a forum where the great powers could openly debate issues affecting global security, those powers could avoid war amongst themselves and act as policemen for the rest of the world. France and China’s places in that vision are particularly interesting because Roosevelt’s plans for these two states were not fully realized. The events that led to China and France obtaining permanent seats on the UNO’s Security Council and the veto power have not been explored as extensively as those that led to the US, Britain and Russia obtaining seats.

According to FDR, France was not worthy of a place on the supreme council of the international organization, but China was.\(^2\) Eventually, with Churchill’s assistance, France was able to join the council despite FDR’s attempts to prevent it. Nationalist China also took a seat on that council and it may appear that the situation worked well for the US. China was not, however, the power that Roosevelt had intended it to be in the post-war world. For Roosevelt, China represented a friendly vote on the future Security Council. A strong China would have been a powerful force working with the United States in the post-war world. Chiang supported FDR’s anti-colonialism policy and Roosevelt thought that Chiang might also act as a balance against Russian interests in the Far East.\(^3\) This was an important role for the Chinese to play, but China first had to achieve credible great power status. Roosevelt wanted to treat China as if that status had already been achieved and, as a result, US China policy diverged from reality. FDR ignored State Department advice, and more

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importantly that of the Foreign Service officers in China, and this led him to make grave mistakes in the formulation and conduct of Sino-US diplomacy. Chiang certainly played a large role in sealing his own fate. Domestic problems in China, both political and military, were very complex and beyond the control of US policy-makers. The extent to which the US could have influenced the outcome of the war for China, though, was further limited by FDR’s conduct and his assumptions about China’s post-war strength.

US policy towards China during World War II consisted of three main elements aimed at promoting China to great power status. Firstly, the overarching policy throughout the war was to support the Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist government under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was engaged in a power struggle with Chiang to rule China and so CCP-KMT relations had an important impact on US policy. The CCP were anxious to gain US support, and some Foreign Service officers were convinced of the wisdom of developing US relations with them further. FDR, though, ignored recommendations to learn more about the CCP until much later in the war, which restricted his policy options. Secondly, Roosevelt extended Lend-Lease aid and military missions to China to build up its military strength and contribution to the war. With this policy the President hoped to enhance China’s military contribution to the Allied war effort. Lastly, the unequal treaties which gave the US extraterritorial rights in China were abolished in order to display China’s equality with the other Allies. The Chinese Exclusion Laws, which had been in place for sixty years, were also repealed by Congress in 1943. This allowed Chinese immigration to the United States to resume and also established citizenship rights for Chinese immigrants in the United States. This, too, was aimed at displaying to the world that China was equal among nations and worthy of great power status. The connection between the abolition of extraterritoriality and the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion laws is not well made in the literature. Thomas Bisson did analyze the two policies and

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5 Memorandum by the Assistant Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Atcheson) of a Conversation with the Minister Counselor of the Chinese Embassy (Liu Chieh), Washington, D.C., November 13, 1942, ibid., p. 351.


7 Wesley Fishel, The End of Extraterritoriality in China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952); John Carter Vincent, The Extraterritorial System in China (Cambridge, Massachusetts: