CHAPTER 7

Rubberlegs, the Peanut and the Limeys: FDR’s Summit Diplomacy

Introduction

Having explored the policy, institutional and personal aspects of President Roosevelt’s diplomatic conduct during the war, what remains is to examine the summit meetings that he held with other leaders. Analysis of these summits sheds light on the President’s relationships with other leaders and his understanding of the Allies’ roles during the war and in the post-war world. The literature that explores the wartime summits does not focus on China’s role in the meetings or put that role into the broader context of Roosevelt’s diplomatic conduct towards China.

Where possible, the President preferred to conduct diplomacy personally in face-to-face meetings with other Allied leaders. There were obvious dangers in having the Allied leaders meeting together at these conferences, but their ability to make immediate agreements about the most significant matters of the war outweighed the inherent risks of travel during wartime. Roosevelt saw his personal interaction with other leaders as providing the foundation on which cooperation and goodwill between the Allies could be built. His friendship with Churchill ensured that many difficult issues were overcome, and Roosevelt believed that the same could be achieved with Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek.1

There were two major issues that the key Allies met to discuss: military strategy and the development of post-war institutions. China’s potential to achieve future great power status justified its inclusion in discussions of the post-war world, but its lack of wartime power meant that it was excluded from military planning and strategizing. The leaders’ summits, however, usually contained deliberations about both issues. Roosevelt did not distinguish between China’s potential to become a great power and its actual wartime status. He wanted China to be accepted as one of the Big Four—but its presence at wartime summit meetings was not appropriate because of its military weakness.

Chiang’s perception that the US considered China to be a wartime great power led to his assumption that China would be included in summit meetings.

---

As a result, its exclusion caused difficulties in Sino-US relations, and FDR's management of the summit meetings did not alleviate those difficulties. Roosevelt was prepared to make decisions based on expediency, and this led to inconsistency when the expedient option did not conform to the policy expressed or implied by a previous decision. These policy changes were usually made at China's expense. The disappointment and resentment that Chiang felt as a result of these decisions further complicated Sino-US relations, as moves had to be made to appease the Generalissimo. Inconsistent policies also added to confusion among the American diplomats and military officers in China about US aims for that country. The summits held after Roosevelt's death showed the damage that had been done to the morale of the State Department as a result of FDR's conduct of wartime diplomacy.

The Exclusion of the State Department

A meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill in Placentia Bay in August 1941 resulted in the Atlantic Charter, and was the first wartime summit. Although the meeting occurred before the US entered the war, it set the tone for interaction between the President and the Prime Minister throughout World War II. It also signaled the way in which Roosevelt would operate in wartime international relations. The Anglo-US relationship dominated the Grand Alliance, and harmony between the American and British positions was seen as of paramount importance. The close personal friendship that developed between Churchill and Roosevelt has been well noted.2 The President later tried to reproduce that relationship with Stalin and, in a much more limited way with Chiang, but Churchill worked to limit the influence of these other Allies.

Hull did not represent the State Department at Placentia Bay. FDR brought with him Sumner Welles, the Under Secretary of State, instead.3 Welles was a friend of the President and probably the only member of the State Department who FDR fully trusted. Welles' advice, however, did little to sway the outcome of agreements made at the summit. The President was more interested in making agreements directly with the Prime Minister than in using the usual diplomatic channels. Although Hull's illness around the time of their meeting may have precluded his participation on that occasion, the Secretary of State was

---

3 Wilson, The First Summit, p. 34.